

Monster Tamer: Volume 1

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Prologue: Incident in a Certain Cave

Humans are all scum.

Sprawled across the ground inside a cave, I continuously cursed in my mind while tormented in pain. That was all I was capable of. I could barely maintain my consciousness, seeing as I was unable to get any proper rest with my body in this state.

I was hungry enough that the acid in my stomach felt like it would burn a hole through me, and my brain was shaking with dizziness. My breath was feverish and unstable. If this was a sign of an oncoming sickness, then my end was becoming clearer and clearer. I had no choice but to accept the desperate situation I was left in.

Fuck! Goddamn it! Why do I have to die all alone in the middle of nowhere like this?!

What sin did I commit to deserve such an end? No, that wasn't the right way to put it. I didn't do anything. They were the ones to do this. I was nothing more than a victim. That's why I continued silently cursing to myself.

I was able to maintain my waning consciousness that way. I believed that the moment my hatred vanished would be the same moment my existence ceased. And yet, I could hear sounds from the entrance of the cave, mocking my measly efforts. It was the sound of something dragging across the ground; an ominous abrasion that shaved away at my spirit.

Stay back! Stay back! Stay back! Stay back!

I screamed in my head, but the sound gradually grew closer. It was no good. I couldn't run away. Still drowning in my despair, I turned my eyes toward the noise. A two-meter-tall creature made up of a viscous liquid stood before me.

"...Aah."

A monster. That's what we called them. They were the natural enemies of humanity. The monster—we named it a slime out of convenience—didn't have any eyes, but it was still looking at me. With agile movements which belied its appearance, it drew closer. I had no way of escaping. I didn't even have the strength to stand up anymore.

"You son of a—!"

I flailed my arm toward it, but its strong digestive fluids were eating my hand. The pain assaulting my skin didn't even reach my

exhausted brain. All I felt was a numbness and a sense of loss.

Aah. So, this is where my life ends. No way... No way... I don't want it to end like this...

“...Someone... save me...”

And with those last pitiful words, my consciousness faded away. This happened on the third morning after I had lost all hope in those known as humans.

Chapter 1: The Students Transported to Another World

One month earlier, the students and teachers of ***** Prefectural High School, including myself, Majima Takahiro, were transported to another world. The moment a sudden sense of intoxication assaulted us in the middle of class, we found ourselves surrounded by unfamiliar scenery: a dense forest with a damp atmosphere. We clearly weren't in modern Japan.

After suddenly being thrown into the unknown, we were left standing stock still, completely unable to grasp the situation we were in. The teachers and several of the students eventually started to assemble the confused students together. A short time later, one of the teachers vanished into the sea of trees to confirm our situation. A truly heroic action. He was surely a good teacher with a strong sense of responsibility. Unfortunately, I didn't even know his name since he wasn't charged with my grade.

Just a few moments later, we heard his screams of agony. As we stood there in fear, our blood running cold, a lizard standing on its hind legs came out of the trees, towering over us at five meters in height. It was like a dragon straight out of a video game.

The corpse of the teacher who went to scout the area was dangling from its enormous jaws. His arm flapped about limply. His fresh blood dripped to the ground. Panic broke out among the students. At that time, I was pushed over by someone and fell to the ground. I let out a scream like a crushed frog as others trampled over me.

I was lucky not to suffer any major wounds from that. I was lucky the dragon was still far away. Other students who had no such luck, however, were eaten by the dragon one after the other.

I think it was the third victim. I saw the dragon corner one of the male students who had fallen on his butt. I had fallen to the ground myself and was unable to run away. Thus, I was stuck watching that scene to the very end. In the instant right before those razor-sharp fangs were about to tear his body apart...

“H-HYAAAAAAA!”

He likely wasn't thinking of anything. The student did all he could to resist by thrashing his arms about—at a speed unperceivable by the human eye and with a weight far beyond imagination.

In the next instant, he had reduced the dragon's enormous head to chunks and blew it off entirely. It was a comical scene. The young dragon slayer was likely the most surprised of us all. And that's how we got through our first major threat using the power that was granted to us: cheats.



Have you ever read a story about being teleported to another world before? I, unfortunately, have not. According to one of my friends who was really into that stuff, the theme of Japanese students suddenly being transported to a fantasy world had been gaining popularity among certain groups of youngsters lately. However, the first time he told me this, I couldn't understand why that kind of story was popular.

I mean, it makes sense, right? We students—born in the endlessly peaceful era of modern Japan—possessed no power. We were nothing but fodder in a world of sword and sorcery. The most we could possibly accomplish was to sneakily hide away. That wouldn't be much of a story.

My friend answered this doubt of mine with the concept of cheats. The term was originally coined for swindling people or breaking the rules, but it was more commonly used in modern Japan to refer to video game hacks which added normally impossible functions to the game.

This was the main template for these stories. The protagonists were granted powerful abilities which far surpassed any common sense. As such, those abilities were also called cheats. It really was a suitable term. Even so, I still couldn't understand my friend's reasoning that we were obviously going to be granted cheats since we were now in another world.

In any case, it was an unmistakable fact that we students, upon coming to this world, had obtained mysterious powers. Some were able to shatter rocks with their bare hands, while others were able to wield powers which could only be described as magic. Mysteriously enough, they understood how to use these powers instinctively. It was as normal as breathing to them.

Thus, without a single hint of sarcasm, we referred to these abilities as cheats. They exponentially raised our survival chances here in this world filled with monsters. We created temporary housing, repelled the monsters, and even rationed food between the entire group.

Having said that, it wasn't like we were all blessed with cheats. Only about 300 of us had them. That was no more than a third of all students. After going on hunts and protecting us, they naturally

formed a group and named themselves the exploration team.

Those who possessed no such cheats were dedicated to the construction of our dwellings while being protected by the exploration team. Thus they were called the home team. That's how the little community we called the Colony took shape. Incidentally, I was part of the home team. My friend who told me about cheats to begin with was also in this team.

The haves and have nots. I couldn't even begin to fathom whether there was a reason behind this segregation. To be somewhat more precise, there were those among the remaining 700 students who had their physical strength slightly enhanced. However, it was so slight it couldn't really be called a cheat. I only felt a slight sense of discomfort in my body, but that was likely no more than a hallucination born of stress.

One week after that, after a few more lives were lost, our existence began to stabilize. At that point, a form of governance started taking shape. The Colony had nearly 1000 inhabitants. It was an absolute necessity.

And with our daily lives stabilizing, curiosity about this world began to spread. Nobody here believed this was the same world we came from at this point. It was even possible for others to learn magic from those who used it naturally through their cheats... Although, the only ones who did so were fellow cheaters. Unlike the members of the home team, who only needed to chop down trees and build houses, they needed to fight to survive.

In any case, we desired knowledge about this world. Were there other humans here? If so, how could we contact them? That's how the first expeditionary force was formed. Their goal was to get through the forest and make contact with any human society that was possibly out there. Thinking back on it now, that name was tremendously ironic. That's because there was never going to be a second expeditionary force.

One week after the first expeditionary force left, the Colony was destroyed. A group of cheaters launched a coup d'état. It was difficult for a bunch of students thrown into a lawless forest in another world to maintain their morals. This applied even more so to the cheaters.

Power made people go mad, and youths often strayed from the proper path. The rebel group aimed to launch their coup d'état when the gathering of those with good intent, the first expeditionary force, were no longer present.

A fierce battle broke out between the rebels and the cheaters who had remained behind to protect the public order. Cheats could easily kill a dragon. And with people clashing using such preposterous power, the students who possessed no such power had no choice but

to run about and try to escape.

It would have been better if that was all they did, though. It wasn't just that group of cheaters who had lost their sense of reason. Even a group of students who possessed no such powers yielded themselves to madness. In the middle of the chaos, I was attacked by students of the home team. My only crime was having bad luck. There were others just like me. We were simply sacrifices to the chaos.

Nobody tried to save me. Nobody had the leisure to even consider it. They were all desperate to survive. I could understand the logic behind that. I could understand, but my heart couldn't accept it. Several students glanced at me as I was beaten down, and they ran away pretending not to see me. Their apathy tore my heart to shreds.

The only reason I got out alive was simply because I had good luck. Just at that moment, a battle between cheaters broke out nearby and a stray shot flew our way. The students who were beating me to a pulp all turned to ash. I was the only one to survive since I was lying on the ground.

After dragging my beaten body out of the dirt and escaping the Colony, I wandered aimlessly through the woods for the next few days. And on the third morning, I finally found a safe cave to rest in and took refuge within.

However, I could do nothing more than that. The only thing outside the cave was a forest filled with monsters. I possessed no cheat and no means of fighting. I could only stay within the cave.

It would've been a better idea to take the risk of finding several reliable people back at the Colony before escaping, if I truly wished to survive. But that wasn't really possible in the middle of that chaos. And even if, for example, the situation weren't so dire and I'd had the time to think that far ahead, it had already become impossible for me to make such a choice.

I was no longer able to trust humans. Humans were all scum. That was perhaps the one thing I had gained upon stumbling into this world. Or perhaps, I had lost something important as a human myself.

In any case, it didn't matter either way. All that awaited me now was death.

Chapter 2: The First Servant

“...That’s right. Humans are nothing but scum.”

I woke up to my own voice. I was in a dark place that seemed to be a small cave. I couldn’t remember what had happened before I fell asleep. What exactly was I doing? I put my hand to my sluggish-feeling head and got up. And that was when I first realized the presence of something else in the cave.

“U-Uwaaah?!”

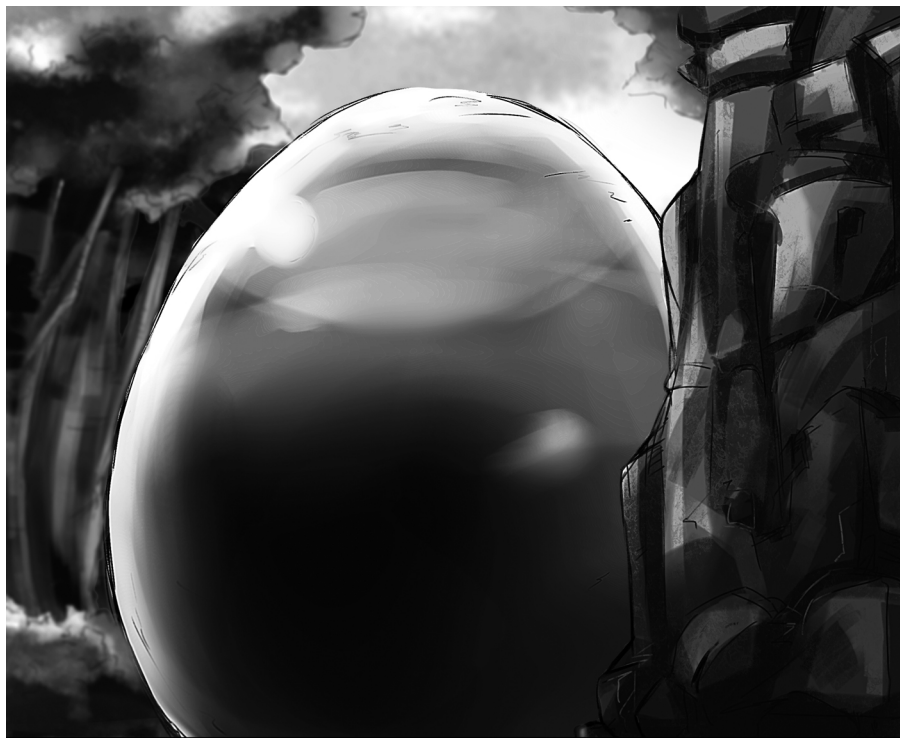
A monster that we called a slime was right next to me.

“...Aah!”

I suddenly remembered everything. I let out a pathetic scream and huddled into a ball. It didn’t need to be said that this was a reflexive action with no meaning whatsoever. I shut my eyes tight and simply waited for my inevitable demise. But after a few seconds...

“...?”

I suddenly opened my eyes. The slime wasn’t attacking me no matter how long I waited. For some reason, it was simply sitting still where it was. It definitely realized I was there. It just showed no signs of attack.



“Why...?”

As I looked down at my hands, I noticed something else extremely important.

“...My arm is fine?”

If my memory served me correctly, the slime was digesting my arm right before I lost consciousness. At best, it should've been badly injured. At worst, it wouldn't have been strange if it was severed from my body entirely.

However, my arm was just fine. My fingers all moved as I willed them. There wasn't a single injury to be seen. Yes, not a single injury anywhere. Even the small scratches I had gotten from running through the woods were gone. And this didn't only apply to my arm. The dull pain that had been running through my entire body was completely gone as well.

“How...?”

The slime approached me as if to answer my doubts. For some reason, I could tell it bore me no ill will.

How can I tell? I'm fully convinced of this.

If it really wanted to kill me, this slime could've dissolved my entire body while I was unconscious. But that wasn't the logic behind my conviction. There was no fundamental reasoning as to how I knew this slime wasn't hostile to me. A more instinctive portion of my mind was convinced this wasn't an enemy.

“Hmm?”

While I remained bewildered by this strange conviction in me, the slime stretched out several feelers toward me. The feelers touched my knee. I apparently scraped my knee when I panicked and rolled into a ball earlier. A slight pain ran through my body, but the feelers had a far silkier touch than I thought they would. A small white light took shape at the tip of the feeler brushing my knee.

“?!”

The white light drew a complicated geometric pattern in the air. I knew from my one month of being in this world that this was called a glyph. I had seen the cheaters use them before. The color of the glyph revealed its attribute. White represented the attribute of light, which specialized in healing and exorcism. By the time the feeler finished touching my knee, the scrape was no longer there. I was able to understand what it had done just from that.

“Did you... save me?”

It didn't reply. That only made sense. This was a monster. However, no matter how I looked at it, it was friendly to me. Another groundless conviction of mine told me so. There was no logic to it. I simply knew. And after receiving so many hints, I finally grasped the

situation I was in.

“Ooh... I get it. So this is my cheat.”

Of the 1000 people transported to this world, 300 of them awakened to cheats. The haves and have nots. I often wondered what differentiated us. And now that I thought about it, I was approaching the question from the wrong direction.

The remaining 700 students simply didn't realize what their own power was. For example, the ability to tame monsters wasn't something you'd notice while staying in a safe location.

“...This is perfect.”

Power was required for me to survive in this world. Power only I could use. I couldn't trust anyone else. There was no way I could. They had all betrayed me. Even those who had sat next to me in class every day laughed with scorn as they broke my ribs. I could never forget that.

I needed to survive on my own. And this ability I awoke to was the means to do so. Mysteriously enough, I felt no revulsion toward having a monster servant despite my inability to trust humans. My instinct was telling me it was alright. It was strange, but it felt natural to me now.

“Thanks for treating my wounds.”

I petted the slime's body. Its silky surface was pleasant.

“...I suppose you'll need a name if we're going to be traveling together.”

It was a bit of an inconvenience not to be able to call it anything. I stared at the slime's body. It looked like a jelly. And so, a name which rhymed with jelly randomly came to mind.

“Okay. You'll be Lily.”

I didn't really have a reason for giving it a girl's name. Thinking of it normally, it was strange to give a girl's name to a creature who might not possess the concept of sex. The slime could have even been male, or maybe my cheat simply knew it wasn't and chose that name for me.

“Best regards from here on out. Please lend me your strength so that I can survive.”

Despite being unable to trust humans, I had no trouble saying such things to a monster. It was entirely possible that my humanity was fatally damaged. However, I didn't mind that. Nothing like that mattered as long as I could survive.

And that's how I acquired power.

Chapter 3: Leaving the Cave

I had power. That was good and all, but I had no choice but to accept that my current situation was extremely dire. It had already been three days since I had a proper meal. It was good news that my wounds were healed, but at the rate things were going, I was going to slowly starve to death.

“Hey, Lily. I need to secure food and water. Can you do anything about that?”

In response, I felt Lily’s will telling me, “Certainly,” in my mind.

I see. This is convenient. Is it some form of telepathy? I can feel a connection between us, like some sort of “mental path.”

In any case, it seemed something could be done about my needs. I had basically thrown that question out there without expecting anything to come from it. This was a pleasant surprise.

“Okay, then could you get something ready right away?” I cheerfully asked.

Lily gave an “affirmative” through our mental path and stretched out a feeler toward me. It shone with an aqua-colored light.

“Huh?”

Water-attributed magic activated, and a large quantity of water poured down atop my head.

“...”

The sound of water splashing across the ground echoed throughout the cave. Despite being indoors, I was drenched head to toe, as if I was out in the rain. I ended up standing stock-still as I watched droplets of water drip from my bangs. Lily’s gelatinous body shook about in a somehow triumphant manner.

“Okay. You’re really talented, Lily.”

There was no mistaking this fact. However, it seemed we needed to spend some time on understanding each other a little more. First, I needed to get across that humans couldn’t absorb water through their heads.



“Achoo!”

I warmed my body by a bonfire while stuffing my cheeks with a whole roasted skink on a stick. My talented partner and guard Lily helped me forage for dry sticks to use as kindling, as well as a number

of these small lizards for food.

My soaked school blazer had dried, and my belly was full. I had an abundance of water at my beck and call. Meaning, now I had to decide on what to do next.

“What do I even start with?”

The first thing that came to mind was securing my own safety. In this case, it meant finding a means of protecting myself from potentially hostile monsters as well as from the students who came to this world with me.

Lily was extremely talented. Her—it was bothersome to skirt around it, so I decided to refer to her as a girl—ability to use magic was a tremendous boon. She apparently specialized in water and wind magic. It was somewhat outside the norm for a slime to be able to use magic. I’d never heard of such a thing while I was at the Colony.

However, as a result of asking her several questions, I determined that Lily was unfortunately not a particularly strong monster. From purely the perspective of combat potential, she was apparently a low-ranked monster among those in the forest.

Even so, it didn’t mean Lily was just some trash mob. I was able to grasp her nature through our mental path, which indicated that she was a monster called a mimic slime. Her special ability was mimicry. Simply put, she could transform into anything she ate. I was quite surprised when I had asked her what she was capable of and she responded by transforming into a skink.

If she were to eat a monster who specialized in combat, she could power up by mimicking it. However, to do that, she had to start by defeating a powerful monster. It was a bit of a dilemma. Having said that, this was only the case before she became my servant. There were multiple ways of accomplishing this now.

“Alright, Lily. I’m going to gather more servants. Please lend me a hand.”

I could enhance our combat potential by acquiring more servants. I believed this to be the natural course of action to take. Lily would have to fight while protecting me if she were on her own. But with another servant available, one of them could be assigned as my guard. The simple act of multiplying our forces was advantageous, and above all else, it allowed for Lily to become stronger by eating a more powerful monster if we could defeat it by combining our powers.

Besides, just taking the future into consideration, there was meaning behind gathering more servants. That’s because I believed my ability to tame monsters was inferior to the abilities of the other cheaters. Those of the exploration team who used cheats could easily kick about the monsters in the forest. While I relied on monsters to fight, it put me at a disadvantage against other cheaters. My only

choice was to make up for quality with quantity. In that sense, having more servants was indispensable.

I was worried whether I would actually be able to tame them properly, but there was no other choice but to give it a try.

“...Don’t worry. I’m sure it’ll go well.”

Perhaps having sensed my anxiety, Lily brought her over-two-meter-tall body closer and gently patted me with her silky surface. Apparently, the mental path transmitted my emotions to her to a certain extent. And in return, I could feel her sense of concern for me.

It seemed that Lily was earnestly thinking about me now that she had become my servant. This made me happy, even if those feelings were born of my cheat to begin with. A warmth filled my heart. I wasn’t alone. I surely wouldn’t have felt like this if a human was with me. That’s because I never knew what they were ultimately thinking.

“I’ll need to stay in hiding for a bit.”

I enjoyed poking the springy surface of Lily’s body for a while as I muttered to myself. It was fine for me to run around and stock up on strength for now.

“There’s one problem though... I’m not convinced my cheat will activate when facing off against a monster...”

The cheaters of the exploration team all naturally understood what kind of abilities they possessed. I was the same in this regard. I had no worries whatsoever concerning Lily. The fact that I didn’t share the same conviction when it came to taming other monsters meant it was completely unknown territory to me.

“Although... I won’t get anywhere by hiding in this hole forever.”

There was a need for me to be somewhat proactive.



I left the cave with Lily in tow as the thick scent of trees and earth tickled my nose. I was accustomed to this smell after spending a month in the forest, but I had forgotten about it over the last few days. That’s because my nose was blocked up by congealed blood and wasn’t working after getting beaten up.

We began by searching the immediate area. The cave I found was a tiny hole on the side of a small hill. The surrounding area was lush with greenery, and the cave itself afforded a poor view of its surroundings. That also meant it was difficult to find. It was probably fine to use that cave as our base for the time being.

“...Found one.”

After an hour of investigating the area, we happened across a monster. A life-sized puppet made of wood was wandering around the area. We called this monster a magical puppet. It was the most common monster within the forest.

Much like Lily, magical puppets possessed a special ability of their own. It could pretty much be summed up as the ability to manufacture magical goods. The puppets themselves were armed with wooden weapons and armor, and these were enhanced using magic. They were astonishingly sturdier than steel.

These armaments were actually the main equipment used by the cheaters of the exploration team. The acquisition of weapons and armor was a primary concern for the team when exploring the forest and fighting monsters. They couldn't go on fighting barehanded forever.

If this were a video game, any old monster would likely have a chance of dropping a weapon. Unfortunately, this was reality, and it wasn't that convenient. Magical puppets were an exception, however. If defeated carefully, it was possible to take the weapons and armor they were using. As a result, the magical puppets in the area around the Colony were hunted to extinction in a frenzy to acquire equipment. The one before me was likely a survivor of said hunts.

"It's looking good." I slapped Lily's body as she sat next to me. "Let's get us a weapon."

The magical puppet was equipped with a spear and buckler. Setting aside whether Lily was capable of using such a weapon, it wouldn't hurt to have such tools available to us. The only thing left to do was to see whether or not I could successfully tame it.

For now, I made preparations based on the assumption that this would become a fight. We went around in the direction the magical puppet was going to cut it off. It was good fortune we found it before it noticed us. This way we could check whether I could tame it without having to suffer a surprise attack.

It might have been better for us to scrupulously plan our every move under the assumption that a battle would break out. However, I possessed no such knowledge. Besides, be it by good or bad fortune, I didn't possess many tricks in my hand to play. Thus, I didn't have the leisure to formulate any manner of complex plan. The only thing I could do was resolve myself.

I gritted my teeth, suppressed my fear, and started the operation.

"Hey! You there! Look over here!"

I jumped out of my hiding spot and got its attention by shouting at it. The magical puppet turned toward me.

"—!"

And in an instant I knew this wasn't going to work. My senses were telling me that this one wasn't going to obey me. In other words, this was our enemy.

The magical puppet fiercely dashed toward me.

"...Tch."

This was a tough situation. I was assaulted by fear toward an enemy I could never defeat. I grit my teeth and pushed down my dread. The strength which gave me the ability to do so was surely what people called trust.

“Do it! Lily!”

The charging magical puppet was struck by a water bullet fired from the side. Splinters of wood flew through the air along with one of its arms.

Lily didn’t move particularly fast for a monster, but it wasn’t all that difficult for her to assault an enemy who had been struck by a surprise attack. Her gelatinous mass crushed down on the magical puppet, and its wooden body began creaking.

“Alright! We got it!” I cheered joyfully.

However, it wasn’t going to go that smoothly. The magical puppet didn’t drop its spear when it was struck, and it used it to stab Lily’s body.

“Gaah?!”

The spear pierced through Lily with a splash as liquid came flying out. The pain I could sense through my mental path with her felt like an unpleasant scratching on my consciousness.

“Lily!”

A second and third time. The magical puppet continued to gouge its spear into Lily’s body. She was apparently unable to use magic while holding down her enemy and continued to eat more strikes. Each time the spear pierced her, liquid shot out and wet the ground.

Lily really wasn’t a monster suited for battle. Her feelers wrapped around the puppet’s arm to try and stop its attacks, but it wasn’t enough to prevent the spearpoint from repeatedly puncturing her body.

Lily’s digestive fluids were eating away at the magical puppet’s body. With such a large form crushing down on it, the cracks which ran down its body from the initial attack were spreading. However, it was possible that Lily wouldn’t be able to hold out until it died. I couldn’t just watch from the sidelines.

“You bastard! Just die already!”

I roared at the puppet and rushed toward the grappling monsters. Lily was my only means of combat—and my last ray of hope. I wouldn’t be able to do anything if I lost her here. But that wasn’t all. The logical part of me saw her as such and decided to take action, but I also possessed a pure fear of losing her.

I don’t want to be alone anymore. I can’t stand it.

The curtain was supposed to come down on the last act of my life, but Lily gave me one last hope. I couldn’t possibly lose her, even if it meant exposing myself to danger.

“Uoooh!”

I grabbed the shaft of the spear with all my might. The combination of Lily’s strength and my measly muscles was just able to stop the spear’s movements. We would have likely both been dead if we hadn’t managed to blow off one of its arms with our surprise attack. Our luck had yet to run out. It was up to us to determine whether our good fortune would continue.

“Come on! Come on! Die! Die! Just die already!”

I repeatedly kicked the magical puppet’s head, but it was completely unfazed by my efforts.

Goddamn it!

The most I could do was help hinder its movements. Victory was ours if we were able to maintain this equilibrium. Lily’s attack was slow but effective. However, were we truly able to keep this up?

I desperately shook off the weak-willed thought encroaching on my mind.

It’s alright. We’ll definitely win.

It was a miscalculation that Lily’s physical strength was weaker than anticipated, but we still had the advantage here. This was the do-or-die moment. We just had to combine our strength to defeat the enemy before us. But just then...

“...Oh.”

My thoughts froze over completely. A new magical puppet had shown itself from behind a row of trees. This one was armed with an axe and a shield, and its featureless face was clearly pointed right at us.

“You’re kidding me...”

My throat felt completely dry. What bad timing. I generally considered myself to have poor luck, but this was far too cruel. We had no means of dealing with a second enemy. It took everything we had just to handle the magical puppet Lily was taking on right now. That being said, even if I let go of the spear and took on the new enemy, I wouldn’t even be able to buy us time.

Do we run away? But that’ll be tough. Lily isn’t that fast, and I’m no better. There’s no way we can get away from these monsters. What do I do? What can I even do...?

As I continued to grope for a nonexistent answer, the new magical puppet charged in. It was even faster than the one we attacked and had closed a distance of more than 10 meters in a flash.

“Lily! Take it down!”

Lily complied with my command and sent forth several feelers to intercept it. In hindsight, this was a poor move.

“Wh-Whoa?!”

The magical puppet we were pinning down managed to pull the

spear out of Lily's body by taking advantage of her grip loosening when she attacked the new enemy. As a result, the spear was yanked out while I was still holding onto it, and I was thrown to the ground where I landed on my back.

"...!"

I reflexively shut my eyes, and when I opened them once more, a wooden spearpoint was hanging right above me. The expressionless face of the magical puppet who was being crushed was looking down on me.

The spearpoint descended. Lily wrapped her feelers around the shaft to try and stop it.

She's not going to make—?!

Wooden splinters scattered to the ground.

A life was taken.

The sounds of battle ceased.

The forest was silent once more.

"...Wh-What... happened...?"

I saw the spear planted in the ground just a few centimeters from my face, and a cold sweat ran down my cheek. My brain spun its wheels trying to get a grip on the situation. The scene before my eyes just didn't make sense. The head of the magical puppet who was trying to stab me was pulverized to bits.

I could tell something came flying toward it. But that was as far as I got in figuring it out. I then heard the sound of something cracking and tearing apart. I turned to look at the noise and spotted a large battleaxe sticking out of a tree. The axe went halfway through its trunk, causing it to tear apart and come down.

"..."

I put my hand to the moist ground and sat myself up. A white light immediately wrapped itself around my body and healed the minor wounds I got from falling to the ground. This was Lily's healing magic. No matter how I looked at it, she should have been healing herself before tending to me, but I decided to inform her of such afterward.

I took a look around us. There was one other monster next to me aside from Lily. It was the magical puppet who was wielding an axe and shield—not that it had its axe in hand. And this one was kneeling before me.

"...Don't scare me like that."

I grumbled a complaint and felt a sense of bewilderment from the magical puppet. It was the same type of connection I shared with Lily. If this phenomenon was common to all my servants, then I could apparently tell at a glance whether a monster had become my servant. Under the condition I could calmly assess the situation, that is.

This information was a great harvest. But that wasn't the greatest outcome from this incident, of course.

After letting out all the strength in my body, I collapsed to the ground.

It seemed I made it through my first battle. And not only that, I managed to obtain a reassuring ally.

Chapter 4: Tragedy in the Mountain Hut

Now then, I can't just keep lying down here forever.

The sounds of battle could likely be heard from a fair distance, so there was a possibility that other monsters or students knew we were here. We needed to relocate immediately. I dragged my tired body off the ground and returned to the cave. My spoils of war were a magically enhanced wooden spear, some slight information on my monster taming ability, and a new ally.

“Okay, I’ll call you Rose. I’ll be in your care.”

I named the magical puppet kneeling before me Rose. I named Lily after a flower, so I just went with the flow and chose another flower name. Just like Lily, Rose was a monster who didn’t really seem to have a sex, so it was somewhat strange to give her a girl’s name... But I was the only one calling them by their names, so it wasn’t a problem so long as they were okay with it.

The stress from having risked my life twice in a single day weighed heavily, so I decided to spend the rest of the day in the cave. Lily, who was injured in battle, remained in the cave with me, while Rose left to forage for food.

I used Lily’s large body as a sofa and lay there in a daze until Rose returned. She was far more agile than Lily was, but she couldn’t use magic.

Rats, skinks, and squirrels.

Due to the nature of her weapon, the small critters Rose brought back were all crushed and split in two, but that wasn’t really a problem so long as I could eat them. I roasted them all over a bonfire. They honestly tasted pretty bad, but I wasn’t going to complain about being able to satiate my hunger.

It would’ve been great to be able to eat something large enough to fill my stomach, but it seemed there weren’t any large animals near the cave. It was possible they were all eaten by the monsters of the forest already.

I heard about this in passing back at the Colony. The difference between normal animals and monsters was the possession of mana. I couldn’t really tell what this meant, but it was apparently something one could more or less sense after learning magic.

The presence or lack of mana created an absolute disparity

between creatures. It was apparently impossible for a regular three-meter-tall bear to defeat a five-centimeter-small monster mouse. In which case, it was impossible for large animals to survive in this environment.

Incidentally, they said mana was stored in one's soul. After defeating a monster, it was also possible to steal a small amount of it. Monsters which possessed a large amount of mana were strong, but that also meant one could gain more mana from them. In truth, the cheaters of the exploration team were getting stronger and stronger by the day. There were even talks of taking along members of the home team on hunts, allowing them to gain the strength to protect themselves. The Colony was destroyed before that plan could be actualized, however.

In any case, there was more to gain by searching for monsters in the forest than making new servants. It was also useful in strengthening my existing forces. This was of course useless if I got killed though, so I had to guarantee it was safe to carry out. I didn't want to walk another tightrope like I did today.

"Alright. Time to get some sleep, I guess."

I was getting drowsy after eating some food. My strained mind desired rest. It was still a little early, but it was time for me to sleep. With allies at my side, I was able to relax and let my consciousness go immediately.



Several days had passed since then. We had spent the entire time in the cave, and our livelihoods had stabilized. I didn't go through any life-threatening danger and was able to properly acquire enough food. I even managed to store some reserves by drying some meat, so my situation was greatly different from just a few days ago.

Lily wasn't currently in the cave. I had her investigate the area around us. The reason I had Rose stay behind was so I could get her to do something for me.

"Mm. It's looking good."

I accepted the wooden shield Rose respectfully held up to me and gave her a nod. It was a fair bit larger than what she used herself and could cover about half of my entire body. On top of being made of wood, it was also rather thin, so even I could hold it up without pushing myself. Despite that, it had a toughness to it stronger than steel. It truly gave me a sense of how unfair magic was.

It was difficult to swing about because of its size, but I basically had no sense for fighting at all. It would be over for me the moment I had to do so. It was more than enough to have something to hide behind like a wall.

This shield was something I had Rose manufacture from scratch. Magical puppets possessed the ability to create magical tools, so naturally, she possessed the same ability. All tools made by her hands were magical in nature. She showed me how she did so by heartily cutting down a tree with her battleaxe and carving the wood using a magical knife.

She had already finished making me a protective breastplate. It looked ridiculous atop my school blazer, but I didn't really have the time to be worrying about fashion.

"Thank you. Next, please make some armor."

Rose's happy thoughts were passed to me as she bowed her head. She wasn't currently equipped with anything other than an axe and shield. I planned to use this armor as a spare while also having something for her to use herself.

Lily returned to the cave a short while later. Having said that, she looked quite different from before.

"Welcome back, Lily."

I turned around to face her. She now had the same form as Rose: a magical puppet. Lily had eaten the corpse of the magical puppet we defeated the other day. As such, she was able to use her ability as a mimic slime to take on the form of a magical puppet. She could still use magic in that form, so her combat abilities had gone up tremendously. She was also capable of using a weapon efficiently, so I handed her the spear we got from the magical puppet too.

However, her ability to manufacture weapons and armor was inferior to the original. Well, this basically meant she couldn't steal Rose's job. That's why I had Lily go out and scout for us.

"Hm? What's up, Lily?"

I cocked my head to the side. Her intent to tell me something was being passed through our mental path.

"Is there something you want to show me?"

I felt her affirmation. Lily had found something while searching the area. But I didn't know what it was. The transmission of thought through our mental path could vaguely convey emotion and will, but it was difficult to exchange information on the level of having a conversation.

"Got it. Let's go. Rose, get ready."

We equipped ourselves as best we could and left the cave.



After leaving the cave for the first time in a few days, Lily guided us to a certain location. There we found a student from my world wearing the same uniform. I had informed Lily to report any sightings

of students to me as a number one priority.

Lily had properly accomplished her duty. As a result, I was now looking at the first student I had seen since the destruction of the Colony—in the form of a corpse, though.

“...Mizushima Miho, I think.”

You could say I at least knew her, and here she was, having died all alone in the forest. I wasn’t sure how to swallow the reality that someone I knew was dead right in front of me. Before I even realized it, I was biting down hard on my lower lip.

If you asked ten different people, all ten would tell you Mizushima Miho was a beautiful girl. She was a second-year student just like I was, and she was part of the wind instrument club. Her hair was dyed flaxen and went down to her shoulders, which matched her cheerful personality quite well.

The fact she had not yet been eaten by a monster meant it hadn’t been that long since she died and that she wasn’t killed by a monster. She was an attractive girl, and there were students about who had lost their sense of morals. There was no need to even say what happened. In the throes of despair, she had thrust the knife she was hiding right into her own throat. Her hand had stiffened up completely from putting too much strength into it and was still gripping the knife, wet with her own blood. Desperation clearly remained imprinted on her charming face.

“Thank you, Majima. Boys really are reliable for physical work, huh?”

“Sorry. It must be boring to work with someone like me, Mizushima.”

“Nope. I don’t really think so. It must be boring...? You sure are serious, Majima. That’s why I’m helping you out like this. I think that’s a good side of you.”

Mizushima Miho was a member of the home team at the Colony. Ever since coming to this world, I had a single opportunity to speak with her while we were in the middle of constructing the Colony. I was surprised she even remembered the name of a fairly plain schoolboy like me. Back then, she smiled at me cheerfully. Just a few days ago... she was certainly smiling.

“Lily...” I emotionlessly called out. “Eat her.”

She immediately did as I ordered. After reverting back to a giant slime, her gelatinous body fell upon the girl’s corpse. Mizushima Miho’s existence cruelly melted away within Lily’s transparent form. I stared at that scene from beginning to end.

The white of her eyes, the yellow of her fat, the red of her organs, the white of her bones... Such grotesque imagery was something I had to remember.

It took a fair amount of time, but Mizushima Miho’s body completely vanished. By the time I realized it, the sun had begun to

set. I couldn't even see the evening rays through the dense forest. All I could see was the sky turning redder and redder as an eerie mix of black and crimson dyed the scenery around me.

And within that twilight-lit scenery, I saw her naked body rise from the ground. She had beautiful limbs, unstained by anything she had suffered in life. The word rebirth passed through my mind, but I shook that thought away. This was different. It wasn't rebirth in the least.

"I'm done taking her in, Master."

Lily's voice, which I was hearing for the first time, was of course identical to Mizushima Miho's. The way she spoke was also the same. It resembled what remained in my memories. The only notable difference was she was referring to me as Master. However, that one difference was enormous. This wasn't Mizushima Miho. It was a monster wearing her skin. Thus, I was surely also a monster wearing the skin of a human. If not, I wouldn't have been able to do something so cruel without hesitation.

That's right. I decided to use Mizushima Miho's corpse.

She was the same as me, a student transported here to this world. That meant she also possessed a cheat. She was simply unaware of what it was, much like I was until a few days ago. Her body should have possessed some sort of outlandish ability. I thought to have Lily mimic that.

It was an unforgivable act driven by villainous intent. However, I resolved myself to do anything for the sake of surviving in this world. I also had a responsibility toward Lily and Rose for having them accompany me on this path.

The best I could do to fulfill that was the worst I could do as a human. That's all this was. I felt sick to my stomach, but it was necessary for me to swallow that feeling away.

"Do you have a grasp of that body's specs?"

"Specs?"

"That body should possess some sort of special ability."

Lily looked puzzled by my question. Well, it was a hidden power that the person in question didn't know about herself. It was reasonable that a mimic would need time to grasp what it was.

"It's fine if you don't know."

Worst case, there was a possibility my hypothesis was incorrect. Even so, I didn't really mind. It was convenient for Lily to simply have a human form. It wouldn't pose a problem in combat either. Lily's mimicry allowed her to use the abilities of one form while using the appearance of another. For example, she was able to use her original power of magic while mimicking a magical puppet. That was naturally no different when she took on the form of Mizushima Miho, who

possessed no combat abilities.

That didn't apply to abilities which depended on the shape she was assuming, however. She wasn't able to use her original body's ability to devour others while in the form of a magical puppet, seeing as she didn't even possess an oral cavity.

"Put on those clothes."

Lily had filtered out all of Mizushima Miho's clothes when she was digesting her. Her blazer was covered in blood, but there was nothing else available. I had no choice but to have her put up with it.

Lily complied with my command and passed her arms through the shirt's sleeves. I averted my gaze from her defenseless figure.



“I’m done, Master.”

“Okay, then let’s pull back.” I didn’t want to stay here any longer, so I immediately began leaving.

“Oh, Master. There’s one more thing I need to tell you.” Lily called out to me as I turned around, and I came to a stop. “There are other humans nearby. They’re the ones who killed... who are the reason this girl died.”

I was well aware that I furrowed my brows at this, and I turned around at the waist to look at Lily.

“How do you know that?”

“I can tell. I mean, I have this girl’s memories.”

I was completely overwhelmed by her casual statement. “Is that... true?”

“Mm. Oh, hang on. It might not strictly be true. It might be better to call it a record. It’s all the same in that I can recall them, though.”

“So, that’s also the reason you’re speaking the same way Mizushima Miho did.”

There was likely some level of deterioration or deficit compared to the original—much like how her ability to manufacture magical tools was inferior to Rose’s—but a fair amount of Lily’s mannerisms were inherited from Mizushima Miho.

Lily’s mimicry may have been far more terrifying a power than I thought. A perfect mimicry would pretty much be the same as usurping the original’s existence. It was normal for me to get dizzy from this. I may have done something far crueler than I intended...

“So, what do we do, Master?”

“Let’s see...”

I got my thoughts back in order. It was important to understand the reality before me, but there was something more important to do than worry about that. The survival of the lowly and miserable cowards who caused Mizushima Miho’s death, as well as what they had done to her, was unforgivable.

I thought it over for just a moment. Lily was waiting for my reply amid the melting scenery of black and red that turned the silhouettes of everything around me hazy.

“...I need to take responsibility.”

That was my answer. I had no intention of getting revenge. She was only an acquaintance to begin with. I was in no way close to her. I did find what happened to her pitiful, and I did feel anger and revulsion toward her assailants. But I felt nothing more than that.

That’s why this was just me taking responsibility. It definitely wasn’t revenge. There was no way I could say it was. I was also guilty of desecrating Mizushima Miho’s body, after all.



Lily guided us to a place that wasn't all that far from where she discovered Mizushima Miho's corpse.

"...What's going on?"

I scowled in confusion. There was a small hut in the middle of this dangerous forest. It was clearly suspicious. Why was there a hut out here? And why hadn't the monsters destroyed it yet? It seemed to me like the monsters would have gotten in the way of its construction...

I headed toward the hut even as such doubts passed my mind, when for some reason, Lily and Rose, who were walking in front of me, came to a sudden stop.

"What's up?"

"We can't get any closer."

According to Lily, the two of them were assaulted by an unpleasant feeling when they approached the hut. I did think it was strange for a hut to be here, but it seemed there was some sort of trick which kept monsters at bay.

As such, I ended up going toward the hut on my own. So long as Lily and Rose couldn't approach it, neither could other monsters. That's why there weren't any particular problems for me to be on my own.

As I got closer, I could hear the voices of cackling men and a screaming woman. Their voices were young, meaning they were likely students who were transported to this world with me.

"...So it wasn't just Mizushima Miho."

Mysteriously, my heart remained calm. It was like listening to a group of dogs.

I see. So I don't even see them as the same as me.

Well, that only stood to reason. I may have been nothing more than a monster who thought nothing of humans, but they were utter scum who were even beneath humans.

I felt a slight sense of relief. With this, I could kill them without hesitation. I went on to investigate the place where Lily's unpleasant feeling was most prominent. The mental path between us was convenient in its own way, but being able to hold a conversation was a major step up. We could share information on an entirely different level like this.

Before long, I discovered a small, transparent stone buried not too far from the hut itself. The stone had some manner of intricate letters engraved on it. My guess was this was some sort of magical item. I had never heard of such items while I was in the Colony, but it made sense if this was a possession of the hut's original owner.

This fact informed me of a simple yet important truth. There were

humans here other than us students. Thinking back on it, it was possible that the first expeditionary force had found such traces of humanity in the forest, which was what triggered their impulse to leave and find a human settlement.

It seemed the humans of this world knew of concepts foreign to us to keep monsters at bay. It was surely a wonderful item. Unfortunately, I had no means of understanding how wonderful it actually was, so I had no idea as to its worth.

That was exactly why I didn't hesitate in crushing it. It was entirely possible this stone was extremely valuable, but right now it was nothing but a hindrance. A safe zone was an attractive proposition, but it was useless to me as long as I was acting in concert with monsters.

There was no mistaking that these students would be killed in a few days like this. There was no need for me to dirty my own hands. However, even if there wasn't a need, it would be irresponsible of me not to.

"Slaughter everyone except for the person who's being attacked."

I didn't feel any anguish when I passed my order down to Lily and Rose. I really wanted to use magic to simply blow up the entire hut, but I was unable to do so because of the presence of a victim. I hated humans, but I didn't plan on killing a girl who had done nothing wrong.

"Oh, hang on."

I called my companions to a stop right before they stormed into the hut.

"Torment them as much as you can. Also, you finish them off, Lily. As long as you have the leisure to do so, that is."

"Hm...? Okay."

There may have been no meaning in doing this. I didn't know whether the dead Mizushima Miho would have desired it. However, this was the only thing I could do for her now.

"Alright, go!"

The two monsters kicked down the door at my command. There were three schoolboys inside, and all of them turned toward us in shock.

"Do it."

Rose charged in fiercely and kicked the boy who was pinning down the girl. She probably wasn't aiming for it or anything, but he screamed in agony from having his jewels crushed. The other boys completely froze up. They surely never thought monsters would attack them here. This was their paradise. But now it was their execution site.

Lily jumped in with her spear at the ready. "Here we go!"

“Gyaaah?!”

The boys were unable to put up any resistance as their arms and legs were crushed, cut to pieces, and torn apart. Bright red blood gushed out like a geyser as agonizing cries filled the air. It was hell on earth. As blood danced in the air, I stepped foot into the hut, took off my blazer, and placed it atop the girl who was being attacked.

“You’re...”

She seemed to be younger than me. She had a pretty face, but right now it was sullied by all manner of things.

“It’s alright. I don’t plan on hurting you.”

She looked up at me, a strange color within her eyes. However, the girl lost consciousness before I could get a read on the meaning behind that. Her dainty body collapsed into my chest. Both her body and mind were surely at their limits. I undid the ropes which bound her arms behind her as Lily was just about to finish the immobilized boys.

“It hurts... It hurts... Why...? How...? How are you alive?! Aaaaah...!” the last boy yelled as Lily brought down her spear.

“Wait. I have something I want to ask him.”

Lily stopped. I took the weapon from her and grasped the boy’s face to make him look up at me.

“Ugh... Please... Save me... I’m begging you... Ow... It hurts...”

“Answer me if you want me to save you.”

He was clearly in severe pain, but I didn’t feel a thing. I was surprised at how cruel my own voice was.

“Is it just you three? Do you have any other friends with you?”

“There’s nobody... It’s just us... Aah! It hurts! It huuurts!”

It seemed they had no other allies. That was good. As a worst-case scenario, I’d thought of the possibility of them having a cheater at hand, but I was apparently just overthinking things.

“I-I answered you! Save me!”

“Hm? Oh, right.”

I did say something like that, didn’t I? I nodded as the boy looked me in the eyes while pleading for his life... and stabbed him in the throat with my spear. He screamed through a fit of choking, coughing, and gagging.

“Well, suffer as much as you can.”

The boy’s eyes shot wide open with disbelief. I gazed at his despair for a short while and then twisted the spear. With that, the light vanished from his eyes.

There was no way I was going to keep my hands clean after ordering Lily to kill them. I intended to kill at least one of them on my own from the very beginning. This was my very first act of murder. From the very moment I resolved myself to survive in this world, I

believed this moment would come. And now that I had done it, it felt far too quick. But what came after everything had finished was far more troublesome.

"Lily," I said with a sigh. "Clean up the bodies. Just throw them out somewhere into the forest."

Lily looked at me curiously. "Is it okay not to eat them?"

I shook my head. "It feels sickening to think of these guys remaining within you. Don't do it."

These boys were surely also cheaters. The abilities they were unable to bring out before death could have been fairly powerful. If Lily were to take in their bodies, it was entirely possible she could obtain such powers.

However, that would be a betrayal to Mizushima Miho. She would surely have hated being inside Lily together with those guys... I also hated the idea. I felt like it would sully Lily. Moreover, I had fears that taking them in would trigger a change in her. Judging from her use of the word "records," she stored their memories and personalities in a place cut off from her own mind. But I still had fears about this, and such fears needed to be eliminated.

"Rose, take care of this girl. Clean her up and put her in bed."

Rose knelt before me and bowed at my command.

"What will you do, Master?" Lily asked as she started her "work."

"I'll... have to do something about this mess, I guess."

The floors, walls, and even the ceiling were stained with blood. Considering how this girl, whose name I didn't even know, might react to the sight, it would be better to clean it all up. I also disliked the idea of sleeping with the room in such a state. This bloody scene was the location of a tragedy.

"..."

A dull headache suddenly assaulted me, and I grabbed my head. My eyes met those of the boy I killed. His vacant gaze was pointed directly at me... That was, of course, just a hallucination. It was nothing more than an illusion my weak heart was showing me.

No, hang on. Wait a sec. Am I weak?

"Are you alright, Master?"

"...I'm fine."

That's right, I'm fine. I'm fine.

I repeated those words to myself over and over. I couldn't afford to be crushed by guilt here. That was the responsibility I had to bear for taming Lily and Rose, for using Mizushima Miho's corpse, and for massacring the students here.

I would have been better off dying in that cave if I was unable to take responsibility for such things.

"I'm fine."

I immersed myself in cleaning up the bloodied hut. Even I could tell I was running away from something by doing so.

Chapter 5: Embrace on a Silent Night

The stillness of the night wrapped around the hut. There was only one bed within. That's where the girl, whose name I still didn't know, was in a deep slumber that would heal the wounds to her body and heart.

As a result, I was using Lily's body as a substitute for a sofa, just like I did in the cave. Rose wasn't in the hut with us. I had her standing guard outside.

It was a silent night.

I stared at the walls in a daze. They looked like they were sinking away into the darkness. I wasn't thinking of anything. I was just staring blankly. Just how much time had passed since I began doing so?

"Can't sleep?"

A voice came from behind me. The feeling of Lily's body, which I had been leaning against, changed. As a slime, her body was something like a gelatinous blob. But that sensation on my back had changed into something with more substance, yet still soft.

"...That's quite the skill."

The Lily beneath my butt was still a slime, cutting off the cold and hard sensation of the floor. Yet the dainty arms of a girl wrapped around my neck and placed themselves atop my chest. In other words, only a single portion of Lily's body had transformed into a girl.

She really was quite skilled to be able to do that, but I also wondered why she was doing something so pointless. With that doubt in my heart, I turned my head around and found Mizushima Miho's... no, Lily's face close enough to touch our cheeks together.

Her mimicry was just like the original. I could even feel the softness of her hair. A pleasant feeling shot up my spine. For just one instant, I thought this was bad. Physical contact brought pleasure. I came to fully realize this after wandering around that sea of trees for three full days in the throes of loneliness and despair. Even if my partner was a slime, the sense of relief and comfort of being in contact could bring tears to my eyes.

And with the body of a girl, I couldn't possibly hold myself back. I didn't mean that in a perverted sense. I simply wanted to cling to her. It was likely my mind was driven quite deep into a corner. I had just committed my first act of murder. However, that was nothing more

than the impetus.

Ever since coming to this world one month ago, every single factor that had changed in my life had forced the mind of this immature and tiny brat far into the abyss. My desire to cling to someone was somewhat like a muddy stream. My sense of reason was nothing more than a small wood chip being washed away by its currents.

“Stop that.”

That’s why it was my emotions that rejected Lily’s embrace rather than my sense of reason. Her body belonged to the dead Mizushima Miho. She was mimicking the body of a girl who chose death over being violated. I couldn’t possibly sully her. That would be unforgivable.

“Why?”

The feeling pressed against my back vanished and I collapsed backwards. I stiffened up, expecting an impact, but Lily’s elastic body caught me.

“Master...”

After falling back, faceup, a girl’s body appeared from between my legs. Lily was crawling over me on all fours. Her bountiful breasts swayed in front of my eyes, pulled down by their weight. Nobody would blame me for being stimulated by this... But they should. I was stupid for being aroused by my desires.

“I want to heal you, Master. Okay? Hey, Master...”

“I told you to stop...”

I felt a great discomfort in my heart, which completely contrasted with the desires of my body to go with the flow. This was even reflected in my brittle tone.

“I have no intention of ‘using’ that body.”

By all rights, just having that naked body in front of me like this shouldn’t have been allowed. That’s what I believed.

“Stop.”

I quietly closed my eyes and clearly showed my refusal. As my servant, Lily should have withdrawn upon receiving my order. She should have. But the aroused voice of a girl... or rather, of a monster mimicking a girl, reached my ears with uneven breaths.

“Are you blaming yourself, Master?”

My entire face was wrapped in a soft sensation. Lily was embracing my head in her chest.

“I want to save you, Master. I want to protect you. So I can tell. I can tell when you’re hurt. I can tell that you hurt yourself for ‘this girl’s’ sake... for ‘my’ sake.”

“...Lily?”

Something was strange. And just as I realized that, Lily continued

incoherently in a feverish pitch.

“I want to offer myself to someone dear to me. That was the meager desire this girl naturally held. That ‘I held.’ I want to do it like that ‘this time.’ If that could heal the heart of the person dear to me, then it would truly bring me joy. And the dearest person to the ‘me right here,’ is you, Master. I’m your servant, after all.”

I reflexively opened my eyes.

“...Master.”

I was met with the gaze of a girl lovingly embracing me in her chest. This was Lily. It wasn’t Mizushima Miho. However, I was able to sense the desire that girl possessed within her. I was able to sense the regret of being unable to accomplish that through the mental path we shared.

But why?

The feelings that girl felt as she died shouldn’t have had an effect on Lily. The memories and emotions she took in were nothing more than simple records. Lily should have been selectively sifting through them. And yet, having her feelings manifest so clearly like this meant...

Aah, dammit. That’s what it is...

It was nothing serious. This was my fault. I wasn’t conscious of it myself, but I was surely thinking that I wanted to fulfill Mizushima Miho’s final regrets. And just like that, my will was passed to Lily through our mental path. As my servant, she simply wished to grant that desire. That’s why it manifested here like this.

Lily was still Lily. However, her desire was Mizushima Miho’s. Perhaps that wasn’t quite the right way to put it. The two of them were already one and the same. All that together made up Lily’s existence right now.

“I love you, Master. Please accept me.”

Lily’s voice was feverish with affection and a small amount of womanly passion.

“...”

What was I supposed to do? I had a responsibility toward Mizushima Miho. The same applied to my servant Lily. Did that mean I should embrace her? But wouldn’t it actually be insincere to answer these two girls’ feelings in such a way?

No, that’s not quite right. Look in front of you.

“Master...”

She was anxiously awaiting my reply with a pained expression as her bangs trembled in front of her face. From the thighs down, her beautiful limbs were connected to the slime beneath me, which was also her body and my makeshift bed. The situation was thoroughly absurd... yet she was certainly a girl. It didn’t matter if anyone said

otherwise. That's because I felt this way myself.

“...”

This might be the wrong decision. It might be unforgivable. And before all that, it might be sheer insanity to do so with a monster. But even so, there was something I had to do. There were feelings I had to respond to. And above all else, my heart was telling me to do so.

“...I'll treat you dearly.”

And so, in a daze, I uttered a vow as I pressed my lips against hers.



How happy a thing it was to have a lovely girl's face before my eyes when I woke up. This was, of course, Lily. She was smiling gently as she waited for me to wake. Looking at her from close up like this, I didn't even think that this was Mizushima Miho. I could sense she was no longer within Lily through our mental path. It was sad, but it was likely better this way. The one before me was Lily. It was better like this.

“Morning, Lily.”

There was no point in trying to gloss it over anymore. I embraced Lily and gave her a kiss. She had a slime's body coming out of her just like before, but I didn't mind at all.

“Morning, Master.”

“Morning, Lily... You too Rose, um... Morning.” I awkwardly greeted Rose, who had returned to the hut at some point in time. Her featureless face was directed toward us as she took a bow.

I was currently naked, and Lily's human portion was also naked. I only just noticed Rose was there after we embraced and kissed while in such a state of dress. It was fairly awkward.

This must've been what it was like when a mother walked in on her son sleeping in bed with a girl. It was a good thing that it brought my soaring emotions back down to the earth, however. It really wouldn't do me any good to be all fired up like this first thing in the morning.

After wiping down my body with a damp cloth, I put on my uniform and stepped outside. I left the door open to let the air in. The stuffiness that remained in there from all sorts of things felt uncomfortable.

Lily sidled up to me and contently wrapped herself around my arm, pressing her bountiful chest against me. She was wearing the blazer that I washed the previous evening. Any clothing we had would get dirty right away from walking through this dense forest. We couldn't ask for many luxuries in such a situation, but I wanted to maintain a minimum level of hygiene to avoid getting sick. On that

point, it was fortunate we could confiscate jerseys and other such clothing from the schoolboys we “dealt with” yesterday.

We returned to the hut a short while later, but the schoolgirl who was sleeping within had yet to wake up. Now then, what was I to do next? I sat myself down on a log stump that Rose had chopped to use as furniture and thought of my plans for the future.

There was no change to my primary objective. I was planning to stay hidden within this forest, steadily accumulating more servants to improve my combat potential and gaining the strength needed to survive in this world.

So long as my power relied on the strength of my servants, it was a necessity for me to be accompanied by monsters. If I were to believe my own senses, then my monster-taming ability required me to be present to subdue a monster as my servant. I had Lily and Rose search the area around us, but even if that served in securing our safety, it didn’t help me in gathering more servants.

There was a need for me to proactively step out myself to do so. The problem, however, was this schoolgirl sleeping in the hut. So long as she was here, I needed to leave one of my guards with her. The only combat forces I had on hand were Lily and Rose. I was nothing more than a hindrance in battle, so splitting up my forces had a direct correlation to a deterioration in safety. Lily and I were basically walking on a deadly tightrope before Rose became my servant, after all.

I ended up saving this girl by going with the flow of things, but abandoning her here was out of the question. In a sense, this girl was the same as me on that day when the Colony was destroyed. Besides, abandoning her after taking the time to save her was even more cowardly than the boys who attacked her. The moment I did so meant I had fallen even further than they did.

In which case, the only choice was to split up my forces while knowing full well it was foolish to do so.

“Mmm...”

The girl woke up just around the time I arrived at that conclusion. I didn’t want to startle her, so I simply watched over her quietly as she steadily got up from the bed.

“...Where...?”

“You’re awake.”

“You’re... the one... who saved me?”

The girl had a fairly small build. Her features were also childish, meaning she was likely a first-year student. Her hair was tied back in pigtails, which further accented her youthful impression. Her childish features looked cute in comparison to those who were the same age as me.

However, her expression was gloomy, and she had shadows hanging from her eyes which spoiled her girly cuteness. That only stood to reason. I considered the possibility that she would scream in fear upon seeing the face of a man like me, but she was acting calmly. She did seem scared, but her memory was just fine.

After I introduced myself, the girl identified herself as Katou Mana. Just as I expected, she was a first-year student. And with our introductions over, she bobbed her head and muttered in a gloomy voice.

“Um... Thank you... for saving me.”

“Don’t worry about it.”

In truth, I didn’t really recognize that I had saved this girl. All I did was act on the sense of duty I felt toward the deceased Mizushima Miho. I didn’t save Katou; simply, the result of my actions saved her. She just had good luck—not that I could say that aloud taking her feelings into consideration.

“I prepared some water in the washbasin over there. You can use it to wash yourself. I’ll be stepping outside while you do so.”

“...Are you going somewhere?”

“You can probably tell by looking at Rose over there, but I have the power to tame monsters. Actually—”

I told her about my current situation. About how I was thinking of increasing my forces, how I had to personally explore the forest to do so, and how there was no need for her to worry since I would leave Rose behind to guard her while I was gone.

The only thing I left out was the fact that Lily was a monster. This was just in case. I was sheltering Katou, but it didn’t mean I trusted her. Some information was better off being kept a secret in this situation.

I thought she would have some questions as to why Lily was glued to me and calling me Master, but unexpectedly, she didn’t touch on that subject and asked about something else entirely.

“You leaving Rose behind to protect me... means I’m dead weight?”

“It’s a poor way to put it, but that’s how it is. But don’t worry. I plan to at least bring you along to a safe place. I won’t abandon you simply because you’re a hindrance.”

I told her that to get her to relax, but Katou shook her head. “I’m happy for your consideration... but I have a request.”

“A request?”

“Can you... please take me along with you when you go to the forest?”

I stared at Katou in shock.

“...You can’t?”

She looked back at me with the eyes of a dead fish. It was clear she wasn't in any sort of mental condition to speak for herself. It was just so unnatural that I immediately held such doubts. However, it made sense for one's thoughts to be in disarray when faced with a situation in which one couldn't do anything. Besides, her request was actually convenient for me. I wasn't planning on leaving Rose behind because I wanted to.

"Please." Katou lowered her head.

I thought it over for a moment then nodded. "Got it. We'll be walking through the forest. It's fine for you to come along and all, but don't push yourself."

"Thank you very much."

Katou once more bowed down. As she gradually raised her head, it looked to me like she was smiling ever so slightly.

Chapter 6: Encounter with a Wolf

I stepped out of the hut while Katou washed herself. Rose stayed behind to help the weakened girl out. I judged it would be easier for Katou to expose her body to Rose, seeing that she didn't look human. She refused at first, saying she didn't need any help, but she eventually accepted my proposal.

As a man, I didn't know whether my judgment was correct. That said nothing of the fact that half the reason I had Rose stay behind was to keep an eye on her. I couldn't really say this proposal was all for her sake.

The moment I came out of the hut, Lily asked in a hushed voice, "...Master, are you really bringing that girl along?"

"This already?" I replied with a strained smile.

"Don't laugh. Geez..."

"Sorry."

Lily pouted and puckered up her pink lips. It truly made her look childish.

"Are you dissatisfied with my decision?"

"I won't object to anything you decide on, Master."

"That doesn't really answer my question."

She would comply with anything I decided on, but that didn't mean she agreed with me. The fact that she'd questioned me the moment we were alone together meant she couldn't stand to wait anymore. I didn't sense any discontent from that, though I knew the reason was she was apprehensive about me exposing myself to unnecessary danger.

"I'm not going to tell you to sacrifice yourself to protect her. I don't care if you just guard her when you have the leisure to do so. Just think of protecting yourself as your top priority, then me, then Katou. It's simple that way, right? You can't get it wrong."

"You've got number one and two wrong already, though?"

"...Anyway, she's unable to fend for herself." I figured that continuing this topic would have us talking on tangents and just moved on. "She's not a danger to us herself. I'm sure we'll be slightly inconvenienced by bringing her along, but I think it should be within our acceptable limits."

"But doesn't that mean you're protecting Katou even though it'll be somewhat of an inconvenience? I mean, you're even hiding my

identity.”

“I don’t care if you get exposed when push comes to shove. There’s not much meaning behind it. It’s just in case.”

Lily seemed more worried than discontented. “You’re going off track, Master. You can’t trick me. Is she that precious to you?”

“...That’s not the case.”

I stroked Lily’s beautiful flaxen hair. *Now then, how do I get this across to her?*

“I think the reason I want to protect her is because of ‘something’ unclear within me.”

“Something unclear?”

“I took Katou under my care yesterday. Whether it be by necessity, by going with the flow, or whatever, it doesn’t change the fact I took her in. Abandoning a stray cat you picked up is irresponsible. That analogy might be a little cliché, but I have a responsibility here I must fulfill.”

That’s what I believed... Or perhaps, that’s what I ended up believing. Despite knowing that abandoning Katou would be far easier, I never thought of making such a choice. This likely wasn’t out of a sense of morality or ethics. I had already committed the sin of killing three people. So, why did I never consider abandoning her? I couldn’t understand my own heart on this matter. That’s why I could only describe it as “something.”

“Master, you—” Lily tried to say something as she looked up at me with her big eyes, but she couldn’t find the right words and instead smiled in a slightly troubled manner. “You’re so serious, Master.”

“People often tell me I’m boring.” This conversation felt somewhat nostalgic to me.

“That’s not what I mean. You’re not boring, Master,” Lily said as she pressed her head against my arm. “So... Mm. I’m fine with protecting that girl. For your sake.”

“I see...” I replied as I pressed my cheek against her flaxen hair. “Thank you.”

It was strange. Even though I was in the middle of a dangerous forest, the feelings I harbored were none other than happiness. It was just a theory, but that “something” I had lost unwillingly was likely time spent like this.

Such a thought vaguely crossed my mind. And, just then, I suddenly realized something. What I truly wanted to protect by doing the right thing may have been this irreplaceable fragment of happiness.



After waiting for Katou to finish cleaning herself off, we left the mountain hut behind.

“Did you forget anything? Just as I said before, we’ll be exploring the forest, but we don’t plan on returning here. Bring anything you need.”

“...Yes.” Katou nodded as she grabbed her handbag.

“Huh? We’re not coming back? Are you abandoning the hut, Master?” Lily asked. She had been clinging to my arm ever since the morning, and she looked up at me with a curious look.

Katou glanced at her with a dark expression, but she didn’t say anything. Lily looked exactly like one of the students who was transported here from Japan, so there was no chance Katou didn’t have suspicions as to why a girl like that was calling another student her master.



So why didn't she ask anything about it? I tried thinking it over, but I couldn't find the answer. It was probably fine to ask Katou directly about her reasoning, but they did say not to stir up a hornet's nest. Plus, if she had a bad reason for doing so, there was no way she would honestly provide an answer either. So there was no meaning in asking her.

It was somehow irritating. I had a mutual understanding with both Lily and Rose through our mental path. But above all else, I trusted them. This didn't apply to Katou, so her existence was just a point of stress for me.

Having said that, I knew full well that traveling with a human would invite this result. I had no choice but to put up with it.

"Master?"

"Hm? Oh, umm, right." I put an end to my useless thoughts and looked Lily in the eyes. "This hut had a barrier of sorts around it to keep monsters at bay, but that's gone now. So, there's no point in having such a conspicuous-looking base like this."

It wasn't just monsters I was being wary about. Humans were also my potential enemies. This hut stood out far too much. Now that Katou decided to go on the move, I had no reason to come back here. However, to guarantee her safety, I had to consider the need to come in contact with other humans.

The best outcome would be to discover a group of humans, confirm from afar whether they were the types to follow the law, and send Katou to them on her own without us having to interact with them. It was fairly unlikely it would go that well, though.

"Alright, let's get going."

"Mm!" Lily replied cheerfully.

"...Okay." In contrast, Katou was a bit of a downer.

Thus, we left the hut behind and headed into the forest. Rose took the lead, while Lily, who was able to attack from afar, took up the rear guard. Katou and I were placed between them under their care.

"Katou. Walking through a forest puts a burden on your body. Tell me if you're getting tired sooner than later."

"I'm... alright."

"Are you tired, Master?"

"Nope. I'm still fine."

As one would expect, Lily was no longer clinging to my arm. She likely realized through our mental path that I regretted parting with her warmth. It was somewhat selfish of me to believe this connection between us was inconvenient only at times like these.

After walking for a few hours and taking breaks every now and then, we noticed an anomaly.

“...Something’s rotting?”

A powerful, putrid stench filled the air. I reflexively wrinkled my nose.

“What should we do, Master?”

“Hmm...”

I was the leader of our little group. I was a pathetic leader who was unable to protect himself in a satisfactory manner, but I had to at least make the decisions. This was one thing I couldn’t rely on Lily or Rose for.

It was fine and all that we sensed the anomaly, but what were we supposed to do about it? It would be undoubtedly dangerous to get any closer. However, everywhere in this forest was dangerous. There was also a chance that ignoring it here would bite us in the ass later on. We could sense where it was fairly easily, so it was possible to sneakily check it out. One could even say the degree of danger was relatively low.

I thought it over for several seconds and decided it was best to take action. “Let’s go. Katou, is that alright with you?”

“...Yes.”

We headed toward the rotten stench. It gradually pushed aside the thick scent of the forest. Before long, we discovered about five scattered corpses that appeared to be those of other students. I say “about” five because the corpses truly were a mess.

“This is quite extreme.”

Their bodies were nothing more than chunks of meat. We observed the situation from afar for a while before concluding that the threat had left the area. We drew closer.

As I was struggling to figure it out myself, Lily surmised the cause of their deaths. “Just at a glance, it looks like they were eaten and torn apart by a large creature, I guess?”

“Meaning, they were done in by monsters?”

“Probably.”

“We might be able to figure out a bit more if we investigate the area.”

I started walking toward the corpses, but I suddenly came to a stop. Unlike Mizushima Miho, these ones had been dead for quite some time and were already decomposing. Because of that, they were swarming with flies. After having already committed murder, I wasn’t scared of a couple of corpses, but these circumstances were somewhat different.

However, I had to do this. This tragic event was most likely caused by monsters. It could have been a monster I’d never even heard about back in the Colony. It would be too late to regret it if I ended up dying because I didn’t get some sort of hint here. There was

worth in searching the area, even if the chance of finding something useful was just one percent.

“Okay. Then let’s take a look... Huh, what’s up, Rose?”

I pulled myself together and was just about to take a step forward when Rose thrust a wooden hand out in front of me. She stepped forth as I stared at her in wonder.

“Are you... saying that you’ll do it?”

An affirmative response came back to me through our mental path.

“H-Hey, Rose...”

In an unusual turn, Rose took action before getting my consent and started inspecting the corpses.

“Wouldn’t it make more sense for you to be on guard duty while I investigate this, Rose? It’ll be easier to report to our master that way.”

Rose rejected Lily’s proposal and held her back. I felt a sense of duty from watching her that told me this was something she had to do herself. Rose gathered all the scattered corpses and quickly began lining up and confirming everything they had on them. The rest of us ended up watching her from a small distance away.

As that went on, my consciousness was completely focused on the corpses. In hindsight, this was a fatal mistake—one I just barely avoided death for.

Lily suddenly screamed in distress. “Master!”

Despite my focus being on something else, my wariness was at least working on a minimal level. My body just barely reacted to her warning.

“Wha—?!”

I turned around and caught sight of something jumping out of the hedges. By that time, Lily was already charging at it.

“I won’t let you!”

She quite literally rammed it. She didn’t have the time to use magic, and she didn’t use the spear in her hands because it wouldn’t be able to reliably stop the assailant’s charge.

“Grawr!”

“Hya?! ”

Lily was flung back, but the assailant was driven off course. The fangs aiming for my head snapped shut just 50 centimeters to my side.

The assailant corrected its posture for landing. Using that opening, I just barely managed to hold my large shield at the ready. By the time I realized that the thing that flew out at me was in fact a wolf with grey fur, it leaped at me once more. I held my shield out toward it and braced for impact.

“U-Urgh?! ”

In an instant, I lost my balance from the crash and collapsed on

the ground face up. This was bad. But just as I began panicking, I heard the sound of the air roaring. The force pushing down on my body was suddenly gone, and I rose to my feet in a hurry.

The wolf landed a short distance away. Rose was now standing off against it. When she saw I was under attack, she had come rushing over.

“You really saved me there, Rose.”

The axe that should’ve been in her hand was no longer there. She had thrown it on the spur of the moment after seeing me in a crisis. That really saved me, but now Rose was only armed with a shield.

“Grrr...”

The growling grey wolf was over two meters tall. If I remembered right, this was what they called a firefang back in the Colony. Its specialty was its namesake...

“Be careful Rose! It’s going to shoot fire!”

Just as I shouted, the wolf’s jaws snapped open.

“Graaawr!”

Flames shot from its mouth in a blaze. Rose charged forth without hesitation and caught the flames with her shield. She managed to obstruct them for a second, but the amorphous stream of fire went around her defenses and began spreading out before my eyes.

“Uh oh... Aaah?!”

The moment the flames were about to swallow me whole, something threw my body.

“Master! Are you alright?!”

“Lily?!”

Lily looked down at me with a strained expression. She had managed to save me from the blaze. After saving me from the surprise attack earlier, she immediately regained her footing and dashed in to save me from the fire.

Following that, she carried both me and Katou, who was further to the back, and ran into the forest. This was a pretty ridiculous scene considering the size of everyone involved, but, as a monster, this was entirely possible for her to accomplish.

“Rose! Keep it at bay just a little longer!” Lily sharply yelled.

Rose planted herself where she was and took on the firefang’s flames. She was blocking the route between it and us. The shield that Rose used was made of wood, but it wasn’t burning due to its magical properties.

After confirming we were no longer in range, she switched from blocking to evading. The firefang’s flames chased her, but she skillfully took her distance. Magical puppets possessed far more defensive power than their wooden exterior suggested. No small amount of fire was pouring over her, but, as far as I could tell, she

didn't appear to be taking much damage. This was a tremendous relief for me.

Lily put us down on the ground. "Master! It's okay to defeat that thing, right?!" A glyph appeared in her palm.

"Yeah, I don't mind. I can't tame that one. Don't hold anything back and defeat it!"

"Roger that!"

The glyph in Lily's palm shined with a vivid blue light. As far as I knew, glyphs were essential in the use of magic. The color indicated its attribute, the size indicated its power, and the shape determined its nature.

There were quite a few people who had been obsessed with figuring out all of these details back at the Colony. So, in just one month of living in this world, they had finished cataloging pretty much all combat-use magic. For example, a glyph of about 30 centimeters in diameter fired grade 1 magic. It had about the same power as a small caliber handgun. That was pretty much how they had categorized everything.

The magic Lily used, which took her several seconds to conjure, was grade 2 water magic, similar in power to a large caliber handgun used for hunting. Swords made of water appeared in the air and took flight like soaring falcons.

"Graaaah!"

The swords flew faster than I could follow. The firefang stopped shooting flames and dodged them by twisting its body and jumping in the air. But even so, everything was well within Lily's predictions.

"Grah?!"

Rose threw her shield and it slammed right into the firefang's nose. The beast's posture broke midair. Rose came charging in. She had lost all of her weapons, but she grappled the airborne firefang while it was still unable to brace itself or put its tremendous speed to use.

She grabbed the wolf by the neck and forced it to the ground. The beast howled and screamed. Back in the Colony, firefangs were considered more dangerous than magical puppets, so watching Rose charge in barehanded gave me a momentary cold sweat. However, it seemed it was going to be alright.

The most terrifying thing about firefangs was their tendency to form packs. Fortunately, only one wolf attacked us here. That fact may have been what brought Rose victory in this battle.

Once the wolf was down, Lily finished things off by cutting its throat with wind magic, killing the beast for good.

"...Is it over?"

As I watched it pass away, I finally let out the breath I had been

holding this entire time. My heart was pounding with a terrible feeling. Even I could tell my expression was quite stiff.

“That had my blood running cold. Are you okay, Katou?”

“...Yes.” Katou bobbed her head.

She was somewhat pale. I probably wasn’t looking any better.

“I’m sorry for being a hindrance...”

“Don’t be. The same applies to me.”

I made a bitter expression. Back then, we managed to take the initiative in our fight against the magical puppet, but naturally, there was also a possibility we would lose the initiative. I knew the two of us were dead weight, but I didn’t think it would be this bad. It was fortunate that we managed to get through it; that was in every way thanks to Lily and Rose’s devotion.

The fact that we managed to kill a firefang was also a boon for us. With this, it was perhaps possible for Lily to obtain a wolf’s sense of smell through her mimicry. I had high hopes this could improve our ability to detect enemies.

After that, we continued our investigation of the students’ corpses. We were unfortunately unable to learn anything useful. I didn’t expect much to begin with anyway, so that didn’t really matter. It was likely they were all killed by the firefang we just fought against.

Keeping a little more on guard than before, we continued through the forest, but we didn’t encounter any other monsters that day and decided to return to the cave.

Chapter 7: The Puppet's Devotion

We managed to get back to the cave before the sun set. Rose and Lily, our combat forces, could see just as well in the dark. Rose didn't even have eyeballs to begin with. However, that didn't apply to the two humans.

Without the sun, the dangers of going through a forest which already had poor visibility shot up exponentially. It was troublesome to stop moving out of fear of taking risks, but dangers that could be avoided were better off being avoided entirely.

That's why we returned to the cave and immediately began preparations for a meal. Today's dinner would be slightly more luxurious than usual. At any rate, we had managed to obtain the entire carcass of the two-meter-tall wolf. We'd left the process of butchering it and draining its blood to Rose right after it was killed. All that remained was to carve off pieces and cook it.

The smell of cooked meat filled the cave. I unintentionally gulped down my saliva. As for the result...

"Ugh..."

I was completely betrayed. That was my honest opinion. I'd had serious hopes for this, but the meat was as hard as rubber. This wasn't meant for consumption. I had heard before that carnivore meat wasn't good, but this felt like it was on an entirely different level. It was to the point where I was beginning to suspect that we failed in preparing it correctly.

Having said that, I had no idea what we could have gotten wrong. I didn't know anything about draining blood, and of course, I knew nothing about how to make this taste better. I'd left everything about dealing with hunted prey to Lily, who had relied on knowledge in Mizushima Miho's memories. She had apparently read about it in a book before. And I knew full well that the meat-processing industry in modern Japan was excellent.

In any case, the taste of the meat was more of a disappointment than expected. Nevertheless, being able to acquire so much of it was a big boon. It was the first time I felt truly full in quite a while.

Lily didn't seem to find the meat unsatisfactory in the least and was merrily shoving her cheeks full of it. Katou didn't complain about the hard and rubbery meat, but she was eating it as if trying to force it down her throat.

“Excuse me...”

Katou immediately went to sleep after finishing her meal. She was surely exhausted. She laid down inside a small cavity near the entrance of the cave where we’d placed the sheets we took from the hut. I could faintly hear her breathing in her sleep.

I was also quite tired, perhaps because of the stress from today’s battle. It might be better for me to get to sleep early as well. And as that thought crossed my mind, I started walking over to my usual sleeping spot.

“Lily?”

Lily hurriedly let go of my arm and jogged in front of me. As she turned around, the lower half of her body transformed back into a slime and she spread her arms out.

“Go ahead, Master.”

It was just as surreal a scene as always. However, this could be considered an everyday event for me now.

“Come on, Lily. Have you forgotten that Katou is right there?”

“It’s alright. She’s sound asleep.”

Just as Lily said, Katou looked to be sleeping comfortably. It was probably alright. After all, Lily’s identity wasn’t a secret we had to take to the grave. We were only doing so for the sake of caution. It was nothing more than insurance if push came to shove.

However, I knew at this point there wasn’t really a need for that. By spending the day with Katou, I had gotten a fairly good grasp of her current condition. She really didn’t have the willpower to do anything. She simply followed us silently and did as she was told, like a robot only capable of moving its legs. I wouldn’t go as far as saying she was an empty husk, but that wasn’t too far off.

Besides, uhh... What was it again? I feel like there was another reason...

My mind wasn’t working properly. I needed to get some rest. I didn’t know that filling my belly would give me such a sense of satisfaction.

“Well, whatever.”

I stopped objecting and sat down on Lily next to where her human body was sprouting. My body sank into the tender blob of jelly that I had been using as a sofa and bed up until now. It felt like my exhaustion was gradually coming out of my spine, and I unintentionally let out a huge yawn.

“You seem tired.”

“...Yeah,” I replied half-heartedly and leaned against Lily’s dainty body. This one was also soft.

“Master, you’re unexpectedly poor at sleeping, you know? You woke up several times this morning too.”

“Hmm? Is that so?”

“...You’re kind of cute, Master.”

She seemed awfully happy as she hugged me from the side. Incidentally, her blazer was dirtied once more in today’s battle, so she was wearing a jersey over her upper body as nightwear. She had also washed her underwear, so a pleasant squishiness pressed against my upper arm. Any man would enjoy this. It was like my exhaustion was melting away, though that was a pretty poor way to put it. It felt like we were lovers snuggled atop a sofa, and I gave my body over to the gentle flow of time.

“...Hm?”

I was in a daze, thinking I would just go to sleep like this, when Rose’s hands suddenly caught my attention. The wood she was carving looked a little different from any weapon or armor.

“Rose? What’re you making there?”

Just as always, she was fulfilling her duty as the night watch while carving wood near the bonfire. I had entrusted her with the job of creating weapons and armor. Even in today’s battle, if not for the large shield I’d had her make me, I would’ve suffered serious injuries. Or in the worst case, I would’ve died. The role she was entrusted with was plain, but it was important.

Rose seemed reluctant to answer my question. She had a featureless face, making it difficult to read her expression, but she certainly did stop moving and hesitate. However, as my servant, she didn’t have the choice of ignoring my requests. Rose walked over to me and knelt down while respectfully holding out what she was carving.

“Sorry for interrupting your work. So, this is... Hmm?”

After turning it around in my hand and verifying its entire structure, I cocked my head to the side.

“An arm?”

It clearly had the characteristics of a human arm. It was still unrefined, but that was likely because Rose was still in the middle of making it. Why was she making something like this to begin with anyway?

I looked at her curiously, and Rose held out her own arm. The flickering red light from the bonfire illuminated the slight polish of her wooden arm. I glanced at it and froze up completely.

“Th-That’s...!” One of Rose’s fingers was completely carbonized. “Did that happen during the fight with the firefang?!”

My drowsiness was blown away in an instant. “Aah... dammit. I didn’t notice at all.” I was irritated by my own inattentiveness and pinched my brow.

“...Actually, Rose. Were you hiding this from me?”

An awkward feeling passed to me through our mental path. It seemed I was spot on.

“Good grief.”

I expelled the air in my lungs, along with my anger, in one big sigh. I did think she was a helpless fool for doing that, but I couldn’t scold her for it either. She surely kept quiet precisely because she was worried about me. The resentment I felt was mostly directed at my own worthlessness.

I couldn’t vent my anger on her. In the future, I would need to at least caution her about such behavior. However, there was something far more important for me to confirm right now.

“Lily, can you do something about this with your magic?”

“Sorry, Master. Grade 3 magic is my limit.”

“...Oh yeah, recovering lost limbs is a special characteristic of grade 5 healing magic, isn’t it?” My friend who was extremely passionate about cheats was awfully well-informed about magic. As such, I naturally knew a fair amount about it myself.

I haven’t really given it much thought lately, but I wonder if he’s doing okay. Even if we did meet again, I’m sure it’ll be hard for us to just chat like idiots again...

“I see. So that’s why you’re making a prosthetic hand.”

That was understandable. Or so I thought, anyway. But Rose shook her head and passed her denial to me through our mental path.

“What do you mean?”

She took the arm back from me to use it to answer my question. She placed it on the ground and then detached her own damaged arm from the elbow down. After that, she stuck the half-finished arm on in its place. A clunk resounded through the cave as the two parts fit together. And as I watched this happen, the unrefined, half-finished fingers on her hand twitched with movement.

“Wha—?!”

Her movements were somewhat stiff, either because she just replaced them or because she was still in the middle of making this arm, but her fingers were definitely moving. After clenching and opening her hand a few times, Rose switched back to her original arm. Naturally, this one moved smoothly just as it did before.

“So that means you can replace your own parts? Like your arms and legs?”

Rose nodded. This was quite surprising. It was decidedly convenient, but I never thought she would be able to do so. It appeared to be an awfully simple part, so how exactly did it work?

No, that’s not quite right. Maybe it works precisely because it’s simple.

Rose’s body was that of a wooden doll. Such a body shouldn’t have been able to move about. What made it possible was likely the

mysterious power which monsters possessed: mana. It didn't change the fact that both her original arm and the one she was making here were simply carved wood. It wasn't all that strange that changing one out for the other meant she could move it around just like the old one.

Setting all that aside, I couldn't just remain shocked by this forever.

"Rose. I have one more order for you to follow. From now on, when you're not making armaments, make spares for your own limbs... No, prioritize the spares. I'd like you to always have a spare available whenever possible."

Rose didn't object to my command. She immediately replied with an affirmation over our mental path. However, at the same time, I also felt her slight misgivings about my order.

"Is it that strange for me to tell you to make yourself spare limbs?"

Rose nodded. It seemed she really didn't understand. I felt a sigh coming to me. It was somehow heartbreaking that she didn't really recognize my intentions. I found this sad, and I even felt responsibility for it. Those emotions were passed to Rose, and her agitation came back to me.

"Let me just tell you now. This isn't just so you can recover right away if you lose a limb in the middle of battle. That's only a part of it."

Rose completely froze up. She was losing her grasp on what I was getting at more and more. This was quite troublesome. I wasn't sure how to get this across to my cute servant who devoted herself so gallantly toward me.

After thinking it over for a while, I realized there was a far simpler way of doing this than trying to find the right words.

"Hey, Rose."

I took her wooden hand and gently caressed her burnt finger. This was something she had lost for my sake. Even if she could replace it, it didn't change the value of what she had paid to save me.

"Remember this. I think of you as a beloved companion, no different from Lily."

The only ones I could trust in this world were Lily and Rose. It was reasonable to assume I was going to gain more servants from here on out, but that didn't change the value these two girls had to me.

"Take care of your own body as best you can. This isn't an order. It's my desire."

Saying this may have been nothing more than a deception considering I was asking her to fight so that I could survive. But these were my true feelings.

Rose stopped moving completely, as if she had returned to being a

regular puppet. Several seconds passed before she came back from her frozen state and knelt before me. She pulled her finger from my hand, and I was left with the unique sensation of the lingering warmth from her wooden limb.

“Raise your head, Rose. It’s fine as long as you understand.”

I had vaguely felt this before, but despite both being my servants, Rose and Lily’s stances toward me were somewhat different. Lily was fairly frank in both her tone and behavior. This was likely because I desired a place for my heart to be able to rest. I truly was healed by her existence. To be precise, Lily likely gained that role when she ate Mizushima Miho’s corpse and acquired the ability to mimic a human.

As for Rose, she was quite different from Lily. Put simply, she was solemn and honest. She was like a warrior who silently fulfilled her duty. Her actions from today were a good example. She had taken the initiative to do the gloomy work of inspecting the students’ corpses, work that anybody would hate doing. If we were to carelessly touch the decomposing corpses, there was a danger that we could be afflicted with some nasty disease. That’s why she had stopped both me and Lily from doing so. As a result, she got stuck playing a villainous role. Thinking back on it, she had even lost a finger to protect us. She was self-sacrificing and loyal. That was Rose’s true nature.

If Lily was the one to heal my heart, then Rose was the one who protected my life from more concrete dangers. It was possible she was responding to my wish for safety within this dangerous world. That was the impression I got from looking at her. I didn’t know whether it was right or not, but either way, I couldn’t forget her devotion even as she hid in the shadows and made no demands for herself. I had to reward such dedication. Or maybe that wasn’t quite the right way to put it... I myself wanted to reward her.

“It’d be nice if we could talk to each other, huh?”

I wanted to hear what she wanted from her own mouth, as well as what she desired of me.

“If that is what you wish, Master, then we shall surely grant it one day,” Lily whispered in my ear while snuggling me from the side in Rose’s stead. “I mean, that’s the reason we servants are here with you.”

“Lily...”

I could feel that Lily was being serious through our mental path. I could always feel it. These girls were here for my sake. So, how could I repay them?

“How nice... I’m jealous...”

Just then, Katou, who looked to be sound asleep, suddenly spoke up.

“You were awake?”

Katou was still wrapped up in her slightly dirty sheets, just as she was before. She had only opened her eyes to look at us without moving.

“...So Lily really is a monster.”

“You heard us?”

“Just a little... in the end. Besides... Lily is looking like that.”

Katou pointed her gaze at Lily’s lower body, which was that of a slime’s. There really was no way of glossing over that.

“Sorry for... suddenly waking up...”

“No, it’s our fault for being noisy. You don’t need to apologize.”

Katou wasn’t in the wrong for waking up when I raised my voice upon noticing Rose’s hand. “Besides, the way you phrased it means you had an inkling this was the case, right?”

“...Yes. Um... sorry.”

“I’m telling you that you don’t need to apologize. We’re the ones who kept it from you. For reference though, when did you realize?”

“Umm... When Lily didn’t take even one step back... in front of the firefang.”

“That makes sense. But didn’t you think that she could be a cheater?”

“She calls you... Master, too.”

Well, that would expose us pretty easily.

Katou then looked to the ground awkwardly before looking at us once more. “Besides... She’s using... Mizushima-senpai’s form.”

“Did you know Mizushima Miho?”

“Yes...”

Katou’s gaze returned to the floor for a moment. It was doubtless she was remembering the now deceased Mizushima Miho.

“...Sorry for not telling you. I was... together with Mizushima-senpai... until yesterday.”

“I see.”

“Aren’t you... surprised?” Katou seemed to be a little puzzled by my attitude toward the information she was hiding.

“I considered the possibility already.”

Mizushima Miho and Katou Mana had both been attacked by those schoolboys. We found out about the mountain hut they were using by pulling the information from Mizushima Miho’s memories. Meaning, it was only natural to assume Mizushima Miho had also been in that hut. In that case, it was fairly likely she was acquainted with Katou.

The reason I never confirmed this with Lily was because I wanted to respect Mizushima Miho’s privacy as best I could. I didn’t have the right to unravel all of her personal memories however I liked. I was even indebted to her. As long as it didn’t pose a threat to my life, I

had no intention of touching upon her “knowledge,” let alone her “memories.”

“Did you run away from the Colony together with Mizushima Miho?”

“Yes... The reason I managed to survive this long... is because I knew Mizushima-senpai...”

Her voice was as gloomy and subdued as ever, but there was a gentle tone to the way Katou answered me. According to her, on the day of the Colony’s destruction, she ran away with a group of schoolgirls. Mizushima Miho was also in that group. It didn’t really mean anything after coming to this world, but the two of them were in the same club at school.

Unlike me, the girls lucked out after running away. They were sheltered by a cheater from the exploration team who was charged with the Colony’s public safety. However, during a collision with students from the rebel faction, their group was scattered. Katou and Mizushima Miho ended up running all the way to that mountain hut with the one boy from the exploration team.

I didn’t understand the mechanism behind it, but that hut had a mysterious stone which kept monsters at bay. The boy knew of this and guided them over to the hut. Then he left behind provisions and went into the forest on his own. He went to request aid from his comrades in the first expeditionary force who should have been a fair distance away by that time.

They didn’t have to consider being attacked by monsters if they remained within that hut, so he surely thought that the girls would be safe there. He didn’t consider the malice and desire of humanity despite knowing full well that the Colony was destroyed by rebel students. As a result, Mizushima Miho and Katou Mana were attacked by the schoolboys who chanced upon the hut. Even so, it would be a little cruel to blame the boy who decided to leave them behind and chase after the first expeditionary force. Nobody could say that his decision was definitely wrong.

The reason the rebellion in the Colony couldn’t be suppressed to begin with was because the first expeditionary force was composed of the elite of the exploration team. Even though we classified them all as cheaters, there were major differences in their combat potential. For example, my monster tamer ability was on the weaker side of things. Although, such a peculiar ability was also on the rare side.

Most of the cheaters were blessed with powers made for battle, like enhanced physical abilities and mana. However, for the large majority of cheaters, that’s all their cheats amounted to. Those who possessed enhanced physical abilities and mana were called warriors; they made up the main force of the forest exploration and Colony

defense groups. Thinking back on it now, it was possible that only those who had such easy-to-understand and manifest cheats were the ones who became self-aware of their own abilities.

The point was that cheaters all possessed tremendous combat strength, but that didn't mean they were all the same. There really weren't all that many cheaters who had physical abilities or powers that towered above the rest. Among the 300 exploration team members, there were maybe 10 who did.

The most famous among those was Nakajima Kojirou, the student council president in our world. Nicknamed the Blade of Light, he was a third-year student who led all the students even after coming to this world. Another was a second-year student like me, the Beast of Darkness Todoroki Miya. Other such examples were the Skanda Iino Yuna, the Absolute Blade Hibiya Kouji, and the Dragon Jinguuji Tomoya.

I didn't know the particulars of any of their abilities, but I had heard they were true cheaters who could take on swarms of monsters all at once without blinking an eye. Looking at it from another perspective, that meant taking on a horde of monsters at once was difficult even for the other cheaters in the exploration team.

"Takaya was... a typical warrior... after all..."

The boy from the exploration team who had brought them to the hut was called Takaya Jun. He decided it would be too dangerous to take them through the forest while also protecting them. It wouldn't have been impossible, but it was understandable he hesitated to expose them to danger like that.

Having said that, there was no future in confining himself to the hut. Hence, he judged it best to leave the two girls there and chase after the first expeditionary force. The consequences of his actions had been tragic, but there was no way of knowing whether or not he was correct at the time unless he was omniscient.

"Hang on a sec..." After listening to her story, I suddenly noticed something quite troublesome. "Meaning, the first expeditionary force may have returned?"

"Yes... It depends... On Takaya, though..."

"And there's a possibility they'll drop by that hut?"

"Yes... Um, Senpai? Is there something... bad about that?"

"It isn't really bad or anything..."

I was being evasive. It was difficult for me to tell Katou why I felt this way.

I don't trust humans.

To take it one step further, I couldn't put my faith in any group of humans. That was the one and only lesson I brought with me out of all that despair and humiliation I suffered on the day the Colony was

destroyed. As much as I could, I didn't want to get involved with any groups of humans. That applied even more to a group where I didn't possess the strength to oppose even a single member.

The probability of chancing upon other cheaters within this vast forest wasn't particularly high. However, that near-zero probability skyrocketed into a fairly realistic scenario in the vicinity of that hut.

From that perspective, abandoning the hut was the correct choice. However, that wasn't the only troublesome matter. If Takaya returned only to find the two girls missing, he was likely to search the area with the people he brought back.

The cave we were using as our resting place wasn't all that far from the hut. It was quite likely they would find it if they searched the area. In which case, I probably had to move my base somewhere else. This was a problem I had to give serious thought to.

"Um... Senpai?"

"Hm? Oh, sorry. What is it?"

Katou's voice brought me back to reality after I had lost myself in my own thoughts. She had a serious look on her face as she stared right into my eyes.

"There's something... I want to ask you..."

"What?"

"That girl... isn't Mizushima-senpai, right...? What... happened to her...?"

I hesitated to answer for a moment.

"She died."

The reason I didn't dodge the question was because Katou's expression was telling me that she was resolved to hear the truth.

"We dealt with the corpse. You can go ahead and believe that's the reason why Lily looks like this."

"I see..." Katou didn't look surprised. She seemed to have an inkling that this was the case. However, tears dripped from her eyes. "So Mizushima-senpai is..."

She continued to quietly cry over the loss of her close friend. All I could do was wait in silence until her tears came to a stop.

"Sorry... We were still in the middle of talking..."

I shook my head. "It's fine."

I didn't trust humans. I hated them. But I didn't believe myself to be such a brute that I could criticize a girl for feeling sorrow over the loss of a friend.

"Don't worry about it. More importantly, we need to decide on what to do from now on."

"Right..."

"It'll work out just fine if that Takaya guy comes back with the others from the exploration team. I'm thinking they can take care of

you.”

I had gotten my thoughts in order while Katou was crying. I had thought it was quite troublesome earlier, but if I wanted to get someone to take care of Katou, then there was a need for me to come in contact with other humans at least once. People who still had a sense of morals didn't necessarily need to be members of the exploration team, but there didn't seem to be any other humans who fit our criteria. This wasn't an opportunity we could miss.

Just as I thought previously, I would check them out before they found me and verify that they were a group with moral sense. Then I could send Katou their way without having to come in contact with them myself. That was the plan.

“Is that fine with you?”

“Yes... It should be fine... But, um, Majima-senpai?”

“What?”

“What... do you plan on doing?” Katou was now sitting up and cradling her knees while looking at me with upturned eyes. “After leaving me... with them... What will you do?”

I answered immediately. “I won't stay with the exploration team.”

If Katou wasn't here, I would surely have chosen to run away from this place immediately. The only reason I even considered getting in contact with the exploration team was so I could leave her with them.

“Why? Even earlier... you looked troubled by this...”

She was awfully fixated on this considering her usually meek behavior. It may have been that she was simply getting back to normal, but it was possible there was another reason for it. In any case, I didn't really have a need to lie about this. If she wanted to ask, then I just had to answer honestly.

“I simply can't trust them.”

“You can't trust... the exploration team?”

I shook my head. I was aware of how petty I was being, but my conclusion was still the same.

“I can't trust anyone. Not ever since the day the Colony was destroyed.”

“...Oh.”

Katou figured it out from that. She had also experienced that day. She should have also seen the unsightly and foolish parts of humanity there. There was just one difference between us. I was shown nothing but the unsightly portions of humanity until I was sick of it. As a result, I was saved by a monster, by Lily. However, Katou was saved at the Colony. That's why she had also seen the beautiful parts of humanity as well on that day.

Aah, but...

In a certain sense, Katou had gone through something far more

horrible after that.

Maybe I'll try believing in others once more. Maybe the world isn't only made up of horrible people.

Katou could say things like that, even after going through such a hellish experience. I couldn't even begin to fathom it despite suffering through that day at the Colony just like she did.

"You went through... something horrible... on that day too... didn't you?" Katou sympathized with me. "...Even though you have... the power to tame monsters."

"I became aware of this power only after the Colony was destroyed. I was saved by Lily here when I was on death's door. I wouldn't be here right now if not for her."

Lily strengthened her grip on my arm and pushed herself against me. I had tried to keep my pain from being expressed through my voice, but I couldn't hide it from our mental path. I petted her head with gratitude and then returned my gaze over to Katou.

"I was nearly killed by the people who sat right next to me in class. Can you imagine it? The guys I sat right next to every day were kicking me while I was down on the ground and laughing scornfully as they did so. Unfortunately, I'm not optimistic enough to innocently trust others after experiencing that."

"So... you don't... trust me, either?" Katou timidly asked.

"That's an awfully difficult question to answer, isn't it?" I replied with a bitter smile.

"S-Sorry..." Katou bowed apologetically. "B-But..."

She looked up once more, and her gaze passed over Lily. Then she glanced over at Rose, who was sitting just a short distance away.

"But you'll be... bringing Lily and Rose with you, right?"

In short, she found it strange I was acting like I trusted Lily and Rose despite saying I couldn't trust others. Well, I'm sure it looked strange from the outside. Even I felt just the smallest sense of discomfort from that realization.

"They're my servants. My companions. I trust them."

Don't put them on the same level as mere humans.

Not that I could say that to Katou. But that was, in fact, what I really thought.

"Is that... so...? I really am... jealous..." Katou murmured quietly.

I had nothing I could say to her. Katou had gone through something horrible because she didn't possess the strength to fight back. There was no mistaking that she was jealous of the fact that I had obtained strength.

And as such thoughts passed through my mind, I looked over the dimly-lit corner of the cave where Katou was.

My heart jumped.

Two eyes with an eccentric glow to them were looking right at me. I felt like I had seen them before. And that's when it suddenly dawned on me. These were identical to the strangely colored eyes this girl exhibited when I first met her in that hut.

"Majima-senpai."

Katou opened her mouth and I came back to my senses. By that time, the flare of emotion that was shown through her eyes for but an instant had completely vanished. In its stead was her usual languid, hollow, and expressionless look.

"About... Takaya..."

"H-Hmm?"

Why did her eyes look like that? And what was she thinking of at that time? Her attitude was just so different from usual that I had completely lost the timing to ask her about it. Not that it necessarily mattered since it wasn't clear she would honestly answer me.

Just like I had told Lily before, I didn't trust Katou despite taking her under my care. That was also the reason I hid Lily's identity from her. Considering those eyes, it seemed there was still a need for me to stay on guard. And after I came to that conclusion, I decided to listen to what Katou had to say.

"What about that Takaya guy?"

"If we come in contact with the exploration team... it may be a problem... for Takaya to meet you, Majima-senpai."

"Meaning?"

"Um... Takaya is... Mizushima-senpai's childhood friend..." Katou stole a glance over at Lily. "What do you think... he would do... if he were to see Lily...?"

"Were they a couple?"

"Oh, they weren't. That's not... what I mean... but, um, he did..."

The reason she found it difficult to speak of was because this was a private matter to the person in question. But after she had already said so much, it was pretty simple for me to guess the rest despite not being particularly perceptive about such things.

"I see. Mizushima Miho was a beauty, after all. She had a good personality too. I bet you would need more than two hands to count the number of guys who fell for her. It wouldn't be all that strange for her childhood friend to be head over heels."

Meaning Takaya Jun didn't protect Mizushima Miho and Katou Mana from the chaos in the Colony and bring them all the way to the hut out of a simple sense of duty or kindness. Interpreting it as having an ulterior motive was going a bit too far, though.

"Mizushima Miho was someone Takaya wanted to protect even at the cost of his own life. If he saw Lily borrowing her form, he most likely would attack us in a fit of rage. Is that what you're trying to say,

Katou?"

"Yes..."

So something troublesome came up just as I decided to come in contact with the exploration team. But that didn't really matter. I had already decided on contacting them. Besides, it wasn't really all that troublesome.

"Got it. Let's keep Lily's case covered up as best we can. She can just dispel her mimicry when we're around that guy."

"I think... that's a good idea..."

"Thank you for warning me about the possible danger."

"It's nothing... This is about... all I can do..."

In a sense, I was able to procure this information precisely because I had taken Katou in my care. The danger of coming into contact with Takaya didn't change whether or not I had done so. If I hadn't met her last night, I would surely have chosen to use this cave as my base for a while longer. When Takaya returned with the exploration team, there would have been a non-zero chance of him unexpectedly bumping into Lily while she was mimicking Mizushima Miho. It was better to know about the active bomb in one's hand than to be oblivious to it. That's what I believed, at the very least.

"I'm grateful for this information. I'm not saying this'll be my way of thanking you for it, but I'll be sure to have the exploration team protect you. And if not, I promise to look after you until we safely arrive at a human settlement."

"...Thank you... very much..."

Katou bowed her head. Her bangs were hiding her expression, but her lips moved ever so slightly.

"But... if you'd really like to thank me..."

"What?"

I couldn't quite hear her, but Katou shook her head. I caught just the slightest glimpse of that eccentric look in her eyes.

"Never mind... It's nothing..."

Chapter 8: Encounter in the Forest

One more week had passed. We were still living in the same cave as before. We spent our evenings in the cave, while we used the days to search the forest. That cycle simply repeated itself.

We came across monsters on several occasions, but we managed to survive all the way up until now thanks to Lily and Rose. That in itself was splendid news. However, the fact that we had to survive through all those encounters meant that we had to fight our way through them. In other words, my primary goal of gaining more servants wasn't going well.

I knew I had to be patient, but I was still in a fluster. The biggest problem really was that I had no idea what the conditions were for my monster taming ability to activate. I could tell instinctively when meeting a monster that it wasn't going to work. I couldn't tell when I met Rose, but I was in a bit of a panic back then and didn't have the composure to calmly think it over and assess whether or not she was my servant.

But I still didn't know the proper conditions. As such, I had to continuously expose myself to dangerous battles. Lately, I'd started thinking I was unable to distinguish what the conditions were entirely. I didn't want to believe that, but...

"I'm back."

"Welcome back."

I had a wooden sword in my hands and brought my arms to a stop as Lily returned to the cave.

"Oh, were you training?" she asked as she ran over to me with light steps.

"Don't put it that way," I replied with a strained smile.

"Hm? Why?"

"It sounds corny. I'm just killing time here."

I decided to do some practice swings with this sword whenever I had the time. I took kendo as an elective back at school, so I at least knew how to do the practice swings. Whether or not I knew how to do them properly, I could at least mimic the movements.

I honestly didn't know if there was any meaning in doing this. It was possible that moving my body around more than usual would mean I could take action when it was necessary. It'd be nice if that was the case. And that was pretty much all the thought I put into this.

I didn't expect much of myself in this respect. If you were to ask me what else I could do exactly, I'd have no choice but to sink into silence. Maybe I was training my weak body whenever I had the time precisely because I couldn't do anything. Not that I knew if anything would come of it.

Incidentally, it was fine to just wave around a wooden stick or something, but since I decided to do this, I figured I might as well have something with the right shape. So, several days ago, I asked Rose to make me something I could swing around.

Unlike us humans, Rose didn't need to sleep. She had the entire night to work and be active. Having said that, she was normally quite busy making all sorts of tools at my request. That's why I would stick on addenda like, "I don't mind if you make it when you have the spare time," and "it doesn't even need an edge," and "it's enough to have something around the right weight and length that I can grip properly."

However, because she was making equipment for me, she was apparently inspired. I was left wide-eyed in shock when she presented what she made for me just one day after I made the request.

Even though the sword was made of wood, the blade had a grey luster to it. The grip was somewhat black and felt like it stuck to the palm of my hand. When I tried swinging it, it was far lighter than it seemed. Yet it didn't feel unreliable, perhaps because its center of gravity was perfectly placed. It was extremely robust, and its edge was nothing to laugh at.

Because it was made of wood, there was a grainy pattern running along it, but it was clear even that had been formed in a way to give the sword a solemn appearance.

How weird...

I was pretty sure I requested something to be used for practice. This was obviously a case of overengineering. Despite being a complete amateur, I could see Rose's crafter-spirit at a glance. She did far too well in making this.

Lily said it was similar to Damascus steel, using Mizushima Miho's knowledge as reference. I didn't know what that meant exactly, but it was apparently a fairly famous metal. This was unmistakably a masterwork, and a complete waste in my hands. The thought of simply handing it over to Lily did cross my mind, but... I was completely incapable of doing such a thing after Rose had presented it to me with such high hopes.

Instead... or rather, additionally, I ended up asking Rose to replace all of our current equipment after she finished with her own spare parts. It was clear her skills were improving as she made more stuff, so it was appropriate for us to upgrade whatever we had. Although, it

didn't seem like she could just pump out weapons that surpassed the sword she made me.

I stowed the sword away in the sheathe Rose made to go along with it and brought my practice to an end as I turned to Lily.

"Sorry for making you go out on your own, Lily."

"Mmm..." Lily embraced my arm as if to say that was where she belonged. Her flaxen hair brushed against my upper arm like a friendly dog.

We had finished our daily exploration of the forest a short while ago. While we took a break in the cave, I had Lily go out to secure food and check on the state of the hut. This was of course to verify whether the exploration team had returned yet. Lily was capable of going there and coming back several times faster on her own than if she were bringing us along.

This was something best left for Lily to do. Because Rose didn't look any different from other magical puppets, in the off chance that she came across the exploration team, it was likely that she would be killed on the spot. The danger was fairly substantial.

On the other hand, if they were to come across Lily, who looked human, it was unlikely they'd attack. Furthermore, after eating the meat of a firefang, Lily had gained the sense of smell of a wolf. It was several times greater than her original senses, so her ability to search for enemies was upgraded immensely. As long as she wasn't careless, I was pretty sure she could retreat before being noticed by the exploration team if she were to find them.

There was the possibility of her being discovered by Takaya, but the chance of her situation being exposed on the spot was fairly low. If she just acted like Mizushima Miho, she could at least buy enough time to rendezvous with us without being suspected.

Rose had all sorts of other work to do, so pretty much all of the work where we humans would get in the way, like foraging for food or exploring the area independently, was delegated entirely to Lily.

"Did you notice anything different out there?" I used my finger to play with Lily's bangs while she clung to my arm in satisfaction.

I asked her the same question I had asked her for the past few days. It was a little harsh to say so after telling her to go out on her own like that, but I didn't expect much in terms of results.

Even if the exploration team were to return, I guessed it wouldn't happen for quite some time still. According to Katou, Takaya knew the route the first expeditionary force was taking. As such, I calculated the time it would take assuming he dedicated himself entirely to the chase.

The Colony was destroyed six days after the first expeditionary force left. Within 24 hours of that, Katou and I escaped the Colony. It

took me three days to reach this cave. Even with the physical abilities of a cheater, Takaya had to match Mizushima Miho and Katou's pace, so it took them several days to reach that hut. He then immediately set off to search for the first expeditionary force, but no matter how much he rushed, there was no way he was going to catch up that quickly to a team who had left ten days ago.

Furthermore, the people he was chasing were moving further and further away as time passed. No matter how much he hurried, the difficulty of getting through this forest on his own far outweighed anything the first expeditionary force would encounter. They were composed of over a hundred elites, so they were surely progressing at a smooth pace.

Taking all of that into consideration, I estimated it would still be another week before they returned. You could even say this was an underestimation.

"I found traces of human activity at the hut... or, I guess, what's left of it."

That's why Lily's report was utterly shocking. "Was it the returning exploration team members?"

"I wonder? I don't know. I came back here immediately, just as you instructed."

"I see. That's fine then... Still, it's weird. It's way too early for them to be back."

Lily presented another possibility. "Maybe it was someone else. There was just one person there, after all."

"Just one?"

"Mhmm. If it was one of the members of the expeditionary force, it'd be strange for them to separate from the group, right? You managed to get all the way to this cave on your own, so it's probably another student who managed to get away from the Colony."

"That's entirely possible."

This forest was rampant with dangerous monsters, but it was fairly uncommon to actually bump into them. At most, we came across them about once a day. And it was, for example, possible to evade an encounter with a monster by discovering it first. This was out of the question, though, for firefangs and the like who had a tremendous sense for locating prey. If the monsters were to locate you first, it would naturally be all over, so that aspect relied entirely on luck. But even those who possessed no special powers could wander around this forest for several days given the right amount of luck.

Actually, this situation was the result of the one month the exploration team spent upon arriving in this world. As a member of the home team, I didn't know much of the details, but back when the Colony was up and running, this area was definitely within their circle

of activity. This must be true, because a member of said team, Takaya, knew of the existence of that hut.

The exploration team's first goal was to eliminate monsters in order to create a safe zone for the Colony. The large majority of monsters within their active area were hunted to extinction. This cave was also within said active area. That's why the population of monsters around here was in rapid decline.

Thinking back on it now, it was highly probable that they hunted down monsters I could have tamed. It was truly regrettable. Not that I could do anything about it now. My greatest fortune was that Lily was never found by the exploration team. My very fate was tied to having met her, after all.

"There's still a possibility that it's a cheater from the exploration team. We won't know until we check, I guess," Lily said.

"You're right. We need to verify what kind of student went to that hut." I nodded in agreement and then made my plan. "If they happen to be a member of the exploration team who went on the expedition or stayed behind to protect the Colony, we'll need to check whether they're someone we can trust with Katou."

"...That's fine and all, Majima-senpai, but may I confirm something with you?"

After walking up to us, Katou joined in on our conversation. It seemed like she was regaining just a little of her energy lately. Her expression was still gloomy, but she stopped murmuring and pausing when she talked. She also became able to ask us about the course of action we were planning to take, just like she did now.

It was a good trend... excepting the fact that my wariness toward her had to go up a level, that is.

"What do you plan on doing if they're not a cheater?"

"The plan isn't all that different in that case. We'll observe them, and depending on the circumstance, we'll interact with them to gather information."

"...Why? I honestly don't think there's a need for that."

"You have a point. If they're not a cheater, then there's no real need for us to check them out or come in contact with them. There's not much to gain by doing so." I acknowledged what she had to say but shook my head. "However, it's possible a member of the exploration team who stayed behind in the Colony is with them and Lily simply didn't notice."

"Yeah, that's definitely possible. I did come back right away," Lily said in agreement.

"Besides, there's a chance they'll know something about the state of the Colony after we ran away. There's a benefit to contacting them if we can get some information on what happened to the rebel group

after that.”

“...Understood. Thank you for answering me.”

Katou bowed. She didn't have any other questions or objections. Thus, we immediately left the cave behind.



We delved into the forest. One week ago, we had to be afraid of surprise attacks from monsters. But now that Lily could mimic a firefang's sense of smell, we could walk through the same forest with an entirely different sense of safety. Having said that, we still couldn't be careless since it was possible to come across a disadvantageous encounter depending on the wind's direction. As such, we marched forward with caution. Fortunately, we didn't meet any monsters on the way to our destination.

The hut was nothing but a shadow of its former self. Not even a day after I destroyed that mysterious stone, it was already ravaged by monsters. And after several more days, it was nothing more than the ruins of a hut. It seemed monsters were still coming by and laying waste to the building. In the not too distant future, it was sure to be reduced to a state where one couldn't even recognize what manner of building it was to begin with.

There was a boy loitering around the wreckage of the building. He was a little taller than I was and had a slightly more muscular build. He wore his blazer with the buttons undone. The only thing that really stood out about him was the frivolous atmosphere he gave off. But I suppose it'd be better to say that he was a perfectly normal Japanese high school student.

He stomped around the ruined hut and rummaged through the wreckage. Every now and then, he would look around, a frightened look on his face, and curse.

What is he thinking?

That was the first thing that came to mind. Anyone who found this wrecked hut would guess that monsters did it and wouldn't stick around for long. I completely thought the student Lily found would've left already. My plan was to use Lily's mimicked wolf senses to follow their tracks, but it seemed there was no need for that.

“Is that a member of the exploration team?” Katou muttered thoughtfully, apparently wondering the same thing I was.

If this was in fact a member of the exploration team, then he was able to move about as he liked without worrying about monsters. His behavior was entirely unlike that of someone so powerful that they didn't perceive monsters as a threat, though.

“No, he's not.”

I denied that possibility. He simply didn't realize the danger he

was in.

“That guy’s part of the home team.”

“Is it maybe someone you know?”

I nodded as I continued watching the schoolboy loiter around and kick the wreckage of the hut in irritation.

“A classmate.”



After having a short meeting, we split up into two groups. As for why we did that, I suppose you could say it was a simple precautionary measure. I headed toward the hut together with Lily. As we got closer, we could hear the boy muttering. He was disparaging this world and the situation he was stuck in. It was all cursing and complaints.

Judging that we wouldn’t be able to get any useful information by just listening in on him from afar, I called out to him.

“Hey there, Kaga.”

“Eek!”

After I called out to him, the boy, Kaga, jumped with a start and shrank back.

“...Hey, don’t run.”

It seemed he was under the impression that a monster discovered him. Kaga reflexively began running away, but my voice made him stop. This confirmed that he was no different from the home team member I had last seen, a student with no power. A cheater wouldn’t have reacted in such a way.

Kaga turned around. “You guys are...” He recognized us and relaxed. “Majima, and... Ooh, if it isn’t Mizushima!”

There was clearly far more tension in his voice when he addressed Lily. That’s the kind of guy he was. Having said that, I didn’t actually know him all that well. Kaga was, at most, a classmate to me. He wasn’t someone I was close to. Even back in the classroom, I only ever exchanged greetings with him. He wasn’t really the type of guy I got along with, and I’m sure the feeling was mutual.

“Thank god, looks like you’re okay.”

“You too, Kaga. Good job getting away from that chaos,” I replied.

Lily behaved in a friendly manner, just as I told her to beforehand, so Kaga ran up to her with enough vigor it felt like he was going to grab her hands. I took a step forward and cut him off. I thought it would turn out like this, and sure enough, Kaga acted just as expected. He really wasn’t the type of guy I could get along with.

Kaga looked completely disappointed and turned his attention to me. “Majima...? Yeah, I somehow got by. You been together with Mizushima since then?”

Even as he talked to me, Kaga kept stealing glances at Lily. It was somewhat unpleasant, but I swallowed my emotions and kept my composure. This was inevitable. Lily was quite beautiful, after all. She was even three times more radiant when she acted amicably like this. She was fundamentally all smiles around me though, so I guess you could say this was the same as usual.

“Fortunately, I managed to get away from the chaos at the Colony together with Mizushima here,” I said as casually as I could, “and we’ve been working together ever since.”

Did I manage to pull it off? How did I even speak before coming to this world?

It was tremendously difficult for me to remember. It had only been one month since then, but it felt like those peaceful days were much further in the past.

“I see. Lucky you.”

Thankfully, Kaga’s attitude didn’t show any hints of suspicion. This could be attributed more to Kaga not really paying attention to me rather than my talent for expressing myself. He only had Mizushima Miho on his mind.

“Seems you also managed to get away safely, Kaga.”

“Yeah, I was worried about how I’d get by for a bit there, though.”

“Looks like we were both lucky.”

“Seriously. I’m glad we could meet again while we’re all alive and kicking.”

“Yeah.”

Kaga didn’t seem to be lying, so I was able to maintain a conversation without any real issues. I was in fact more or less relieved to know that someone I knew was still alive. It was better for him to be alive than dead. That was only obvious, and such an obvious feeling still remained within me.

It wasn’t like I thought all humans should just die, like the last boss who tries to bring about the apocalypse in some video game. It was certainly true that I distrusted and disliked humans though, so it wasn’t like I was the hero of said game either.

“I just got here today. Were you two maybe using this hut as your base?”

“Do you really think we could?” I was unable to hide my astonishment at his ridiculous guess. “We’ve been hiding in a far less conspicuous cave.”

“Hmm, a cave, huh? How primitive.”

“Primitive is still better than this place. Actually, I’m surprised you’ve been loitering around this wreck. Haven’t you noticed? Monsters made this mess.”

“What?! Seriously?!” Kaga was so shocked his eyes looked like

they would pop out.

“And why exactly would humans go and destroy a perfectly good hut?” I said with a sigh. “You can tell at a glance that it didn’t fall apart naturally too.”

There were many visible signs which clearly pointed at monsters being responsible for this. So, what was Kaga spending so much time looking around here for?

I guess it doesn't really need to be said.

“S-So, we should get the hell away from here already,” Kaga said in a panic.

“Yeah.”

Thus, we left the hut behind.

“Anyway, I’m surprised you two managed to survive. You were both part of the home team, right? Do you maybe have one of those cheaters with you?” Kaga kept shooting glances behind him as he questioned me. His voice was full of hope.

“What about you?” I asked.

“I wouldn’t go off on my own like this if I had someone like that around. I’ve just been lucky,” he replied with a grimace.

“I see. The same goes for us. We’ve just been desperately running about, and we got here before we knew it. I managed to pick this thing up, but it never really came into use.” I slapped the wooden sword at my hip.

“Ooh. A wooden sword from a magical puppet, huh? Uhh, what?” Kaga looked at the sword curiously. “Doesn’t this seem... kinda different?”

I averted my gaze and played dumb. “...Who knows? These things are all a mystery to me. I just picked it up after finding it on the ground.”

Kaga’s eyes were of course attracted to the imitation Damascus steel sword. My servant’s adorable thoughtlessness almost caused him to be strangely suspicious of us, but Kaga lost interest and simply went “Hmmm” as he looked the other way. I was saved by how little interest he had in me.

“Well, it’s not like I could even hit a monster with it, so it’s more for self-defense... Oh, I have used it for hunting small animals, but that’s about it.”

“I brought rations out with me from the Colony.” Kaga proudly pointed at the backpack he was carrying and laughed.

“How shrewd.”

He was definitely pretty stupid, but this facet of Kaga was likely what had helped him survive until now. Other than that, I suppose it was all a villain’s luck. Not that I could really say that myself.

Even as I spoke with Kaga, I continued to walk and push the

thickets out of our way. Lately, Rose had been taking the vanguard and doing this, so I was no longer used to the heavy labor. I was breathing rather roughly.

Actually, Kaga. Could you forget about Mizushima Miho and help me out already?

“But still, you and Mizushima?”

“It’s just a coincidence.”

“Is that cave you mentioned close?”

“Relatively. We’ll have to be careful while heading that way, so it’ll take about an hour.”

“And you’re the only ones there?”

“Yeah.”

Kaga kept persistently asking about our circumstances as we walked. It was only reasonable that it was on his mind. After spending so much time in the forest alone, he was surely starved for conversation. That was how I decided to interpret it, at least. I didn’t want to think of anything unnecessary, so I focused on creating a path we could walk through.

“So, the reason you guys were at those ruins was ’cause the exploration team might come that way?!”

“Yeah. It might still be a while, though. It’s not guaranteed they’ll come either.”

“That’s more than enough! That’s great! We’re gonna survive!”

“Right.” I responded vaguely and continued making a path toward the cave.

We gradually ran out of questions to ask each other, and our conversation eventually changed to something closer to idle gossip.

“Oh yeah, I found some corpses of guys who were eaten by monsters near here.”

“Was there a bunch of them all torn to shreds?” He was likely talking about the corpses we found a week ago. We continued to search the vicinity since then, but we didn’t find any more dead students. “So, they’re still there. What about them?”

“I mean, one of those guys was an exploration team member, I think.”

“...What? Really?”

This was information I didn’t know. My hands unintentionally came to a stop, and I turned around to face Kaga.

“Yeah. I’m pretty sure he was a cheater who didn’t go along with the first expeditionary force and stayed behind at the Colony to protect it.”

“I didn’t notice that...”

“There’s no helping that. The guy was just a regular soldier. He was like an outcast even among the other warriors. That’s why the

expectation guys didn't take him along."

"...I see."

Something about the way Kaga disparaged the dead bothered me, but I decided to leave that aside for now. He wasn't the type of guy to listen to advice from others, and he had no reason to listen to me. Besides, this wasn't the time to be fixated on such inconsequential matters.

If what Kaga was saying was true, things were a little bad. It would mean that there was a powerful monster in the area who could even kill a cheater. Granted, he could have just come across a group of monsters and got taken out while trying to protect the other students who were nothing but hindrances. It was better to assume the worst, though.

It seemed we would be better off moving our base sooner rather than later. Or perhaps it was worth considering that our very survival so far meant the dangerous monster had already left the area. But that was being too optimistic. We had to move our base. At the least, we had to consider such action eventually.

While I was thinking about our situation, Kaga constantly tried to talk to Lily. I had told Lily beforehand to smile and respond appropriately in a friendly manner. There was a chance her disguise would fail if she didn't speak with him normally. Fortunately enough, Kaga was only interested in desperately displaying his good points, so it didn't seem like we had to worry about Lily's identity getting exposed.

In any case, did this guy truly understand the situation he was in? It wasn't the time to be hitting on girls. Or perhaps it was precisely because he knew the severity of the situation that he was doing so. I didn't really like the reasoning that if you're going to die anyway, then you may as well do what you want, but I did understand it.

"We're here."

We managed to arrive at the cave without much trouble.

Kaga gazed at the cave with interest. "Hmm. So this is the place."

I got my breathing back in order and then lightly glared at him. "I'll need you to help out with all sorts of things from now on, okay? There's a ton that needs to be done, like finding food and such. We don't have enough hands to go around."

"Yeah, yeah, I know." Kaga waved his hand at me like I was being an annoying nag. "Oh come on, cut it out. You acting like the leader already?"

"I wasn't intending to. A leader doesn't really mean anything with just three people to begin with."

"Damn straight." Kaga laughed and then snapped his fingers as if he had suddenly realized something. "Oh yeah, there's something I

gotta tell you.”

“Oh? What’s that?”

“Uhhh.” Kaga put on airs and acted like he was deep in thought.

“Before that... Could you have Mizushima go back to the cave?”

“Why?”

“It’s a private talk between us guys. You get it, right?”

What’s this guy on about?

Kaga leaned in a little closer and lowered his voice. “I wanna talk about the expeditionary force.”

“The expeditionary force?” I asked in a quiet voice myself.

“Yeah. It’s about when those guys’ll get back... or whether they’re coming back at all. You wanna hear about it, yeah?”

If this was in fact true, then I had no choice but to hear him out. Not that I knew what that had to do with keeping Mizushima Miho out of it. However, from what I could see from Kaga’s attitude, he showed no signs of yielding. Judging that nothing could be done about this, I turned to “Mizushima Miho.”

“Got it. Are you fine with that, Mizushima? We’ll be nearby, so go back ahead of us.”

“Mm. Got it.” Lily nodded and turned on her heels.

After seeing her vanish into the cave, I turned to face Kaga once more.

“So? What’s this about the expeditionary—”

“Dumbass. Mizushima might still hear us.” Kaga cut me off. “It’s a bit of a stimulating story. Can’t have her hearing us. Let’s go out a little further.”

Kaga began walking without waiting for my reply. I let out a heavy sigh at his refusal to even let me nod and followed after him.

Chapter 9: Settling Matters in the Forest

I followed Kaga through the forest. Ever since meeting Lily and Rose, I always had one of them with me. It was strange going out on my own. I wasn't a child who couldn't be separated from their mother... but it somehow left me restless.

While I was lost in thought, Kaga suddenly started talking. "You know, it's a great help that you got through this. Same with Mizushima, of course." He kept his back turned to me, so I couldn't see his expression.

"Right. Same to you, Kaga. Let's work together to keep surviving."

"Of course. With the situation we're in and all, we've gotta combine our strength."

"Yeah. By the way, Kaga. About what you were saying..."

"Hm? Oh, I guess this is far enough."

We came out into a slight opening. Perhaps seeing that as a good opportunity, Kaga came to a stop and turned around. It was difficult to tell since the scenery around here never really changed, but we weren't all that far from the cave. Even if one weren't familiar with the area like I was from scouting for several days, they could possibly return on their own. It would be simple for even Kaga to make it back without me.

As such thoughts passed through my mind, I cut right to the chase. "You said you knew something about the expeditionary force."

"Yeah, I did."

"So, tell me. How do you know anything about the expeditionary force's situation?"

"Well, you know, I've got a senpai in the expeditionary force's top brass that I got along with is all."

"Senpai... A senpai, huh?"

I let the word roll off my tongue. I knew pretty much nothing about the exploration team members, seeing that I was part of the home team. That applied doubly so for any upperclassmen.

"That's right. A senpai. From my club."

"You were in the tennis club, right?"

"Yup." Kaga nodded with a smile. "That's why I know details about the plans they made. This kinda information's gotta be shared, yeah?"

I nodded in agreement. "You've got a point."

If this was in fact true, Kaga's claim here was entirely correct. He was evidently happy that I acknowledged this, but it seemed Kaga was in a good mood for an entirely different reason. I decided to take things one step further.

"So? What exactly do you have to tell me?"

"Let's see..." He looked at me as I stood there ready to seriously listen and then suddenly grinned. "Before that, I got a question for you. Have you done it with Mizushima yet, Majima?"

"Huh?"

"Don't play dumb. You've been all alone with her all this time, right? All alone with a beauty like that. No matter how much of a stick in the mud you are, you're not gonna tell me you never even gave it a thought, are you?"

"...What does that have to do with anything?" I replied in a quiet voice.

"It's got everything to do with it," Kaga said as if it were perfectly obvious. "We'll be working together from now on, yeah? Let's not keep any secrets. I'm not gonna cooperate if you do. You've gotta tell me everything."

"So what does that have to do with me, um... having a special relationship with Mizushima?"

"Cause it's important. Think it over. We're two guys and one girl. If we don't make it as clear as black and white who Mizushima belongs to, then it could light some sparks between us."

"Mizushima doesn't belong to anyone."

"Aaah. You can cut that shit out already." Kaga waved his hand around in an annoyed manner. "No more bullshit. Tell me what you really think. Hey, Majima, we don't got a whole lot of room for error here, and now we've got a futile quarrel over a woman between us. That's no good now, is it?"

"I'm pretty sure getting infatuated with sex in the middle of this situation is the futile part."

"So, that means you haven't laid a hand on Mizushima. You really are a dumbass. I mean, look at the situation we're in. Even if a plain and serious guy like you pushed her down, she'd probably go with the flow and let you go as far as you could, you know?"

"Like I could do that."

"Haah, what a wimp."

"Shut up." I wrinkled my brow and averted my gaze. "It's got nothing to do with you."

"Nothing to do with me?" Kaga laughed. I could sense him ridiculing me. "It's got... everything to do with me!"

His voice was suddenly filled with scorn. I could hear the sound of

him kicking off the ground. I turned back to face him, but my reaction was a little too slow.

“Ugh!”

A shock ran through my cheek. The hardest part of his fist struck me in the jaw. I was unable to bear it and tumbled to the ground.

“Gak!”

Another impact. He kicked my chin. I ended up biting my tongue because I couldn’t clench my teeth in time. That’s just how merciless his attacks were. It was clear he was accustomed to fighting.

“You fucking dumbass!” Kaga exclaimed in a grating voice.

“You’re too fucking naïve, showing an opening at a time like this!”

“Gah?!”

Another strike to my stomach. I felt a weight lifted from my hip. He had stolen my sword.

“What are you doing...?” I crawled up onto my butt in an unsightly manner and looked up at Kaga as he held my sword triumphantly. “Hey, Kaga. Do you have any idea what you’re doing right now?”

“Do *you* know your position here?”

Kaga’s eyes were bloodshot from his abnormal excitement. He was carefully observing my movement. He would absolutely bring that sword down on me without hesitation if I showed any signs of resistance. I couldn’t make a careless move.

“Don’t worry. I’ll give Mizushima your regards.”

“My regards... Do you really think you can? How do you plan on explaining this to her?”

“You sure are dumb as shit. We’re in another world, in this stupidly dangerous forest, yeah? I could just say you got done in by a monster or something.”

“Do you really think she’ll believe you after you so forcefully got me to come out here alone?”

“I don’t really care if she believes me or not. You two are the only ones using that cave, right? With you gone, Mizushima will be alone. It’ll work out either way.”

“I see.” I took a deep breath and spat at Kaga, who was looking down at me with a hideously twisted smile. “You scumbag.”

“Say whatever you want.” Kaga sneered as he raised the sword overhead. “It’s all just the whining of a sore loser.”

I looked up at Kaga expressionlessly. “You’re right.”

“...?”

Kaga remained there with his sword held high, looking puzzled. He was undoubtedly thinking I would bawl my eyes out pathetically, plead for my life, and beg him to let me off. He was both suspicious and dissatisfied that I wasn’t acting the way he imagined.

However, Kaga didn't think of the reason why. He was just that kind of guy. I knew this. I knew it from the very beginning.

"Die!"

The sharp blade of the sword came down toward me. I was still sitting on my butt. At this rate, I would be killed without being able to do anything. However, I wasn't worried in the least.

"Look out!"

Someone jumped out in between us.

"Wha—?!"

Kaga raised his voice in shock, but he wasn't able to stop the blade's momentum. The sword deeply embedded itself into the girl's head.

"Ah, gah..."

After that fatal blow, a meaningless sound escaped from the girl's throat.

"A-Aaaah!" Kaga screamed and pulled out the sword.

With nothing left to support her, the girl's body crumpled. Her flaxen hair splayed out on the ground, and "Mizushima Miho" was left staring faceup at the sky.

"Aah fuck! Why'd this happen?!"

Kaga yelled in anguish as he grasped the situation. Was he feeling guilty about killing someone completely innocent...? Of course, he wasn't.

"What a goddamn waste! I'm not a fucking necrophiliac!" Kaga cursed.

He didn't regret killing someone at all.

"Kaga, you..."

"It's not my fault! It's not my fault dammit! All you had to do was die quietly!"

He directed his unreasonable anger toward me and raised his sword once more. His twisted face revealed nothing but the irritation of a man who couldn't satisfy his beastly desires.

I continued gazing at what I considered the ugliest expression in the world. "That's enough," I quietly muttered.

"Huh?"

Kaga raised an eyebrow. However, I had no obligation to answer the doubts he harbored. I was more than patient enough. I even gave him a chance. He was the one who let it go to waste. That's why I quietly gave my order.

"You can cut the act now, Lily."

"You little shit. You lose your mind or—Eep?!" Kaga started ridiculing me again but shrieked and took a step back.

"Gaah... Gyaa, aargh."

The girl with her face smashed in steadily got up. Kaga's wide-

open eyes were glued to Lily. I could only see the back of Lily's head, but it seemed her face was quite the grotesque scene.

"Uaargh... ah, aaah. Urgh."

Lily shook her head about. A transparent liquid fell from the tip of her chin to the ground, wriggled about, sidled up to the tips of her feet, and was reabsorbed into her body.

"Urgh... Argh..."

Her blurred voice was getting clearer and clearer.

"Guh, aaah... Mmm. Is this alright?" By the time she turned to me, the wound on Lily's head was completely gone. "...That was a little surprising."

Lily was acting indifferently, as if nothing serious had happened.

"What?"

"You know what? I lost consciousness for a second there when my head got crushed. Seems like it's a problematic part of this mimicry."

As a mimic slime, Lily's original form had no primary organ to process thoughts. However, she created a brain when she mimicked other creatures, so her thoughts came to a stop when she took damage there. As a result, it took her some time to recover from it.

"Also, Rose's sword is way too amazing. What's with that? It went through me like butter."

"Sorry for making you go through that."

"Oh. Mm. I don't really mind. It was just a little scratch. You're the one who got hit a bunch. It hurt, didn't it, Master?"

"Pretty sure this is what you'd actually call a scratch."

"You're lying. Stop pretending... Oh, no way, you're bleeding. Geez..."

Lily came up to me with a glowing white glyph in her palm and lovingly brushed my cheek. For the first time since we started this act, she looked at me with upturned eyes and then glared at me ever so slightly.

"I could've covered for you with magic if you just ordered me to."

In the meeting before all this started, we made a plan for Lily to launch an attack with magic at my signal if I deemed Kaga to be a lost cause. Because I was late in making a judgment, she hesitated to attack Kaga and instead had to go through something painful.

"...Sorry."

"That's enough about me."

"Lily..."

"Don't be so reckless."

Her finger ran down the contour of my chin and separated from it like a droplet of water. By that time, the pain I was enduring from my slight wounds had completely vanished.

"Wh-What's going on...?" Kaga was completely left behind by the

situation and gasping for air. “Th-That’s... not... Mizushima...?” He was looking at her like she was some indescribable beast.

Lily turned back around to face him. The moment he met her eyes, he trembled in fear and averted his gaze to me with pleading eyes.

“Wh-What is this...? What’s going on?! Why?! Why is Mizushima...? You’re...? I’m...”

I shrugged my shoulders. “Did you think I was an easy mark?”

“Huh...?”

“If so, you’re far too naïve.” I threw his remark right back at him.

Kaga remained in a daze for a few seconds. He was just now properly thinking things through, reexamining every moment since we reunited here in the forest. I could see a countless number of thoughts racing through his mind as I looked into his wide-open eyes. And as his thoughts came to a stop, Kaga finally figured out what I was getting at.

“Y-You... So that’s what this is?!” He finally got a grasp of the situation and hatefully glared at me with bloodshot eyes. “Majimaaaa! You fucker! You set me up?!”

“Don’t be stupid. You did this to yourself.”

It was laughable that he was trying to shift the responsibility here. True, I was in fact keeping things from him. I accepted his slander on this point. However, the one who brought about this result was none other than Kaga himself. The very fact he thought the opening I dared to show him was an opportunity proved his human nature was rotten. Not only that, he invited me out to the forest here just to kill me. He had no right to complain.

“Lily. Do it.”

There was clearly no more information I could get from him as he stood there with anger and fear plastered on his face. I had considered the possibility that he was working together with a cheater, but I was apparently being overly cautious. He was simply an idiot with good luck. Or not... He was scum who didn’t even amount to that much. There was no more worth in listening to him.

“Goddamn it! Majimaaaa!”

Kaga screamed in desperation and came charging in with the sword. Lily met him with her bare hands, and the dull sound of a neck breaking resounded through the forest.



“...Is it over?” Katou asked as she showed up together with Rose.

“Yeah.”

“Good job...”

I shook my head. “It’s nothing. I didn’t really do anything.”

In truth, I really didn't do anything praiseworthy. From the very beginning to the very end, everything went pretty much as we expected.

Ever since I spotted Kaga at the hut...

The moment we split up into two groups, we decided on interacting with him. Actually, It would've been fine to observe him for a little while longer before making our move. However, if we left him loitering around the wreckage of the hut like that, he could've been killed by a monster before we got any information out of him. That's why we had no choice but to make contact immediately.

After splitting up, Rose and Katou carefully observed us. That's because the two of them would be an inconvenience in measuring Kaga's human nature. Having said that, we couldn't ignore the danger of getting attacked by a monster while I was alone with Lily. That's why I had the two of them follow us while maintaining a reasonable distance.

Lily served as both my guard and "bait" to measure Kaga's human nature. Even if he hadn't lured me out on my own, I was planning on giving him an opening from the very beginning to test what he would do. Things turned out a little differently from what I hypothesized, but everything was within our range of expectations; we had planned well. Naturally, if Kaga seriously showed signs of wanting to cooperate with us, I did plan on sheltering him. But such was the result he beckoned.

"...Is he dead?" Katou asked.

"Yeah," I replied with a nod. "I killed him."

I wondered how this looked to her. I'm sure she felt "fear" toward what could've been her. Katou and Kaga. I lied to both of them about Lily's identity. The situation in either case was fairly different, but it didn't change the fact that Katou would've also ended up like this if she had acted poorly. Even if it didn't actually happen, it was true I had considered a situation where I had to kill her. In any case, she must have found this unpleasant. It was entirely possible she would grow even more fearful of me.

And fear easily warped human behavior. Just like it warped the students who fell into a panic back at the Colony. Just like it warped me when I was being tormented. And perhaps, just like it warped Kaga. He had been wandering around the forest all on his own for a long time, so the balance of his mind crumbled and he lost his conscience. This may have been a result of that. Katou surely wasn't an exception to this. There was no mistaking that witnessing Kaga's death before her changed her internal stance toward me.

I took a glance at her profile.

"..."

She was looking at Kaga's corpse with an emotionless gaze. And just then, her eyes suddenly turned to me. Mysteriously, I didn't sense a single hint of animosity, malice, or distrust in her.

"I understand your feelings, Senpai." On the contrary, she said something that completely betrayed my expectations. "Humans... can't be trusted... The only ones who can be trusted..."

Katou stared at me. She was making those eyes again. I really had no idea what was going through her mind. Thinking back on it, there was one time when I first met her that I couldn't get a read on her.

What exactly was she thinking of?

"Katou, what... Uh? H-Huh?"

Just as I began speaking, a sudden bout of dizziness assaulted me.

"M-Master?!"

Lily grabbed my arm and supported me. Thanks to that, I at least avoided pathetically tumbling to the ground. However, my vision was still reeling. My head was shaken. I grabbed my sides and let out a groan.

"A-Are you okay?"

"...Y-Yeah. I'm just a little tired, I guess?"

It was strange. Everything from beginning to end went as I expected. I didn't do anything to exhaust myself. Yet my shoulders felt unusually heavy.

"In any case, let's go back to the cave."

"M-Mm. Let's. I'll get things ready for you to rest right away."

And pulled along by Lily in a panic, I returned to the cave.

Chapter 10: The Puppet's Embrace

I was sinking away. Sinking away deep, deep into the depths. It was suffocating, yet I couldn't float back up. And as I sank, it kept getting thrust before me again and again. That thing I didn't want to hear. That thing I didn't want to see. Didn't want to smell. Didn't want to touch.

Again. Again and again. Even if I cried and screamed, nobody would save me. That's because there was nobody else here.

I was alone.

I was sinking away all alone.

"..., ..."

Just then, I felt like I could hear something. It was... a voice? A voice screaming from afar. I listened carefully and could tell this voice was calling for someone.

They were calling for someone... but who?

"...! ...er!"

The darkness around me trembled. That voice continued calling out. Each time it did, it shook my very existence. My consciousness was shaking. My entire body was shaking. I finally realized the voice was calling out to me.

"—ster!"

With my consciousness drifting about in a dark bog, I realized I was in a dream. Now that I knew this, it wasn't all that difficult to surface from the depths of darkness.

"Master!"

My body shot up in an instant.

"Haah... Haah... Haah..."

My breathing was rough. The air I expelled was accompanied by an unpleasant heat. While enduring the dizziness, I blinked a few times and spotted the light from a bonfire. It seemed I had fallen asleep. If I remembered correctly, there was that thing with Kaga... And then, right after that, we returned to the cave. I had only planned to rest my body a bit until it was time to eat, but it turned out I had fallen completely asleep.

After having a coughing fit, I concentrated on getting my breathing back in order and then took one long breath.

I had a horrible dream... At least, that was what it felt like. I couldn't remember the details. I didn't want to remember the details.

“Are you alright, Master? You appeared to be having a nightmare.”

From the corner of my eyes I could see a towel being held out to me. It seemed she had been waiting for me to calm down all this time.

“Y-Yeah... Sorry.”

I took the towel and pressed it to my face. I was sweating quite profusely. My head was heavy. Perhaps because I was woken up in the middle of sleeping, it felt like a portion of my brain was still left behind within that nightmare.

A nightmare. A dream of swimming in the depths of darkness. My entire body was trembling. Was this because of the cold? Or was it something entirely different?

“You’re sweating a fair bit. I’m sure it’s rather uncomfortable. How about wiping down your body?” The considerate voice next to me interpreted my trembling as being cold. “Please take off your clothes. I’ll wash them for you.”

“Okay.”

I obediently nodded like a child. Was this because I saw a nightmare? Having someone worry about me was endlessly reassuring. I felt like laughing at my own childishness. That also meant I had regained myself enough to laugh. That’s why...

“Hm?”

After finally regaining my consciousness, my head still buried in the towel, I realized something was out of place. After all this time, the question of who exactly I was talking to came to mind.

“Is something the matter, Master?”

It was an unfamiliar voice. Her tone was far more polite than what I was used to. Lily was much franker when she spoke, and Katou didn’t call me master. Lily wasn’t even in the cave to begin with. She was out foraging for food, seeing that we’d had to put our foraging activities on hold for other business. Katou didn’t have much stamina, so on days when we left the cave, she often dozed off whenever we returned.

That’s why there shouldn’t have been anyone here for me to talk to. Oh, but it wasn’t like I forgot about my one other companion in the cave, of course. However, she wasn’t able to speak. That was supposed to be the case.

I slowly raised my face from the towel.

“Is something the matter, Master?”

Rose was speaking.

“Rose...?”

“Yes. I’m Rose. That is the name you gave me, Master.”

It took me about 10 seconds to accept the reality before me. How could I have possibly been able to remain calm about this?

“Rose? Are you really talking?”

“Yes. My wish of being able to speak with you has finally been granted, Master. It’s an honor.”

It turned out I wasn’t mistaken. I seriously wondered for a moment whether this might be some sort of ventriloquism. However, it really didn’t seem like this was a joke. Not that I thought Rose would participate in such a prank to begin with, considering her personality.

“I never really thought you’d be able to speak.”

It was difficult to believe even after accepting the reality before me. I did remember this coming up in conversation before, but I never thought she would so easily accomplish it. It must’ve been quite difficult.

Or maybe it really wasn’t. Thinking back on it, Lily was able to hold a conversation the moment she took on the form of a human. I could tell through our mental path that Rose possessed a fair amount of intelligence. Furthermore, it was clear she understood all the vocabulary I used based on the fact that she could properly follow all of my verbal instructions.

In other words, the main problem these girls had in conversing with me wasn’t a matter of lacking knowledge or intelligence. It was simply because they didn’t possess a vocal organ to do so.

As long as they could use their abilities as monsters to make a voice, it was possible for them to hold a conversation with me. And there was no need to even confirm what abilities Rose possessed to accomplish this. Her specialty was creating magic tools. I once saw her making a replacement for her own arm. With that much information, I naturally arrived at the answer as to how this was feasible.

“Did you remake your body?”

“It’s just as you discerned.”

I did notice she was making something lately. I completely thought it was more spare limbs, but it turned out she was developing a vocal organ. It was probably entirely different from a human’s though. Rose’s head was as featureless as it was before. She still had nothing resembling a mouth. Taking a closer look, a portion around Rose’s throat was just a little thicker. It seemed that was where her new vocal organ was located.

“I didn’t really think you’d be able to talk. You’re amazing, Rose.”

“It wasn’t much.”

Her voice was that of a woman’s, perhaps to match the name I had given her. Her somewhat deep yet calm tone was a perfect fit for her personality.

“Even though I recreated a portion of my body, it is very crude

compared to what my elder sister Lily is capable of.”

“I don’t think so.”

I spoke from my heart, but Rose shook her head. She appeared to have low self-esteem.

I also came to learn quite casually that Rose idolized Lily as an older sister. There was no mistaking that Lily became my servant first, but it still felt a little out of place. Well, I was sure to get used to it eventually.

“Master.” Rose called me once more while I was thinking of something meaningless.

“What is it?”

“Please change your clothes. Also, how about taking the opportunity to cleanse your body? If you were to ask my sister, I’m sure she would prepare water for you to do so.”

“Yeah, I’ll do just that.”

I had completely forgotten about it from the shock of Rose speaking. I did as I was told and took off my sweaty clothes.

“I have prepared a change of clothes.”

“You’re always so well prepared.”

“You honor me.”

“It’s quite refreshing for you to be able to answer me.”

The towel I was using was something Rose put together using wood wrapped with ivy. I really was greatly indebted to her. It pained me that I had no way of paying her back. I dampened the towel and used it to wipe the sweat off my body. Then I steadily poured the rest of the water on my head to wash my hair. Just that was enough to refresh me considerably. Having said that, I was unfortunately unable to experience the fully refreshed feeling of dipping into a nice, hot bath like I could in my own world.

Sometimes I longed for shampoo and soap. I had no idea how such things were made, so, unfortunately, I couldn’t ask Rose to make some. And with no knowledge of what the raw materials were or how to process them, it was impossible for her to make them on her own.

It’s impossible... right?

It was somewhat frightening to think that Rose might actually be able to pull it off. The theory of magical omnipotence was steadily being established in my head. It was perhaps worth asking her to do so even if I thought nothing would come of it.

And as I pondered such things, I used the larger towel she passed me to wipe down my body and then changed into the jersey she had set aside for me. Incidentally, these larger towels were confiscated from the boys at the hut and from Kaga.

As I got changed, Rose finished washing the uniform I was wearing and hung them up on the clotheshorse we had set up by the

cave's entrance.

I warmed my slightly chilled body by the bonfire as Rose came up and knelt beside me. She seemed to be worried about me in some way.

"Looks like you have something you want to say," I told her with a strained smile to see if I could rouse her interest.

"It's just as you say, Master," she said after putting her hand to her chest and bowing.

"What is it? Speak your mind."

"It looks to me as if you have been worrying about something, Master."

"Straight to the point, huh?"

I strained another smile, and Rose bowed once more.

"I'm sorry."

"Don't be. I didn't really find it unpleasant." I found her attitude, befitting of her honest personality, quite charming. "Just to make sure... Why do you think so?"

"As far as I know, this is the first time you have groaned in pain from having a nightmare, Master. And it occurred right after such a thing happened with your former school friend. I do believe it is rather natural to conclude there is some sort of causal relationship between the two events."

"You've got a point there."

It was far simpler than I expected. I couldn't really laugh at Kaga like this.

"May I have permission to ask you more about it?"

"I don't plan on hiding anything from you two." I felt a smile forming, brought on by seeing Rose's faithfulness and her consideration to confirm it with me first.

"Master, do you regret having done such a thing to your school friend?" she asked in an extremely serious tone.

"Not at all." I answered Rose's direct question with a clear answer. I didn't regret killing Kaga. "I have both you and Lily with me. There's even Katou, who I promised to shelter. There's no way we could take in someone as a companion who's so weak to temptation. Besides, he tried to kill me first. I'm not such a kind soul that I'd overlook that."

I wasn't a saint. I was nothing more than a regular 17-year-old student you could find anywhere. I wasn't capable of such benevolence, and in my opinion, such a thing was nothing more than simple foolishness.

Even if Kaga were to survive and get away from the predicament I had placed him in, it was pretty clear he would continue creating victims like Mizushima Miho and Katou. In that sense, one could even say what I did was a good deed. Although, that really was far too

shameless and self-justified to use as an excuse. Nevertheless, such a facet of his death did exist.

“So, what have you been worrying about, Master?”

Rose was apparently under the impression I was feeling regret over killing Kaga. Her curiosity was passed to me through our mental path.

“It’s not anything so excessive that you could really say I’m worrying about it.”

Rose really had a tendency to exaggerate. That was just how seriously she thought of me. The depths to which she devoted herself to me was somewhat embarrassing.

“Could you tell me what exactly it is? That is, of course, if it does not inconvenience you, Master.”

“There’s nothing inconvenient about telling you.”

I actually wanted her to know, seeing that she so seriously thought of me. That’s what I honestly thought, which was why I was able to reply naturally.

“I don’t trust humans. No matter who they are. It’s abnormal.”

“That’s not...”

“No. You don’t need to deny it. I’m fully aware my humanity is twisted. I think that’s fine too. At the very least, I shouldn’t get tricked as long as this is the case. And if I don’t get tricked, then I can settle things without exposing my companions to unnecessary danger.”

“How splendid of you.”

“I wonder about that. It may simply mean I’ve become a coward.”

I was self-aware of this much and debased myself for it. I persecuted others, but even so, I wasn’t so strong a person that I could trust someone with a smile.

“I got rid of Kaga today. As a result, even if it was just a needless anxiety, we were able to count out the possibility that Kaga was working together with a cheater. However, we didn’t manage to get any information on the Colony. Well, it was all a swing and a miss. But we did manage to get information on a danger we didn’t know of before.”

“The case of those butchered corpses, correct?”

I had already informed the others about this information. Rose cleverly understood what I was getting at.

“Kaga was a simple man. All of his actions fell within our estimations. And I’m not just talking about the countermeasures we thought up for every scenario.”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean I was convinced he was going to betray me.”

That’s why the events today simply followed what I expected from the very beginning. There wasn’t a single dangerous part to it.

However... or perhaps precisely because of that, I came to a realization.

"I did what I had to. That's why I don't regret it... But you know, it's not like I didn't feel anything."

I hated humans. But I did feel relieved to see an old classmate who used to sit next to me well and alive.

I didn't trust humans. But I still felt pain when they plainly showed their malice toward me, even if I didn't trust them.

I wouldn't hesitate to do anything if I could protect my safety and that of my companions. But that was nothing more than cutting away my hesitation with my resolve. Once I made my resolve, the ideal path would've been to carry things out without pause and feel nothing about my decisions.

I just barely managed to do things without hesitating. But it was impossible for me not to feel anything. Even against a lowlife scum who would kill me for the selfish reason of getting his hands on a girl, I was incapable of feeling nothing from killing a former classmate.

The only ones capable of this were likely those called "heroes." Or perhaps, those called "monsters." As the "master of monsters," with Lily and Rose in tow, I should've been like that. However, I was neither hero nor monster. I was unable to stay that strong. That's what I came to realize. Even though I awakened to a cheat, I was still nothing more than a 17-year-old brat.

"...I don't understand," Rose muttered.

"I see."

I didn't feel dejected. I simply felt this was inevitable.

"I believe you are mistaken, Master." Rose's tone sounded somewhat stiff. "At the very least, I believe you know there was no other way."

"You're right. I didn't do anything I need to be ashamed of."

"...Even so, is that not enough?"

I silently shook my head. It wasn't possible for me to feel nothing unless I completely cast away my heart. It might be more natural to throw away my human heart along with my trust in humanity. That was perhaps the path to becoming a monster. In such a case, there should've been nothing easier to do.

The reason I couldn't was, ironically, because I had met the monster named Lily. I met her, and I was saved by her. In a certain sense, I lost my chance to throw away my heart when Lily saved me.

I wonder what Rose thinks of this aspect of me?

I was curious what she thought of the state of her master. Was she exasperated? Or perhaps she was disappointed. I didn't think she would just up and abandon me... Actually, I didn't even want to think of that, but it seemed I at least had to prepare myself for some candid

advice.

Or not. The fact that I'm even thinking this may mean I'm still making light of their devotion as servants.

It all happened too suddenly. My mind went blank for an instant.

"My apologies, Master."

The moment Rose apologized, she placed both her hands on the ground and bowed.

"...Why are you apologizing, Rose?"

This was the scene where I exposed how pathetic I was. I was the one who should've been apologizing to my servant for making her come along with such a master—setting aside whether Rose would allow that. And yet, she was the one lowering her head to me. I truly didn't understand.

"I don't understand the subtleties of your... of human emotions. As such, I'm unable to save your heart, Master." Rose's tone remained calm, but a quiet sense of helplessness could be heard in it. "I exist to protect you. I don't care if my body is reduced to wood chips as long as I can accomplish that."

Even without our mental path, I could tell from the sincerity in her voice that she was being absolutely serious.

A servant. A monster. An existence which accepted my wish and lived for the sake of accomplishing it. Her loyalty was the real thing. That was perhaps exactly why her devotion sometimes made her feel so helpless.

"All I can do is, at most, protect your body. I'm unable to truly protect your heart. Even if that role belonged to Lily to begin with, I find myself pathetic for being unable to do so. If she were here right now, I'm sure she would be able to comfort you..."

"Wh-What are you even saying?!" I stood up in a fluster. Rose was making an outrageous misunderstanding. "You're dead wrong if you think you haven't saved my heart!"

I missed my chance to throw away my humanity when I was saved by Lily. If I had managed to throw it away back then, I'm sure I wouldn't have felt a single thing from Kaga's betrayal and his fate. I may have even been free of that nightmare. However, I never once regretted the way I was.

I surely wouldn't hesitate in making my decisions from now on, just as I hadn't before. Even if it were someone I could laugh with, I had already made the resolve to fight the moment they turned into my enemy.

The reason I could think this way, despite being nothing more than an ordinary student, was because Lily and Rose devoted themselves to me. Summing it up so simply as needing to be comforted was absurd. Every single one of their actions supported me

at all times.

That was exactly why I felt I absolutely had to dispel Rose's misunderstanding. I wouldn't be able to forgive myself if I didn't.

"Rose." I grasped Rose's hand while she remained prostrated before me.

"Master?"

"Come here, Rose."

I pulled her hand. She reflexively resisted for just a moment but obediently took my hand and stood back up. She was just a little shorter than me, and I pulled her into my chest and hugged her with both arms. I caressed her simple, spherical head and embraced the hard yet warm and gentle wood within my arms. I could feel Rose's existence closer to me than anything else.



“Master...?”

I felt the bewilderment born in her heart through our mental path. As such, I was sure she could feel the sense of relief born in mine from holding her like this just as strongly.

“You’ve exhausted yourself for me more than enough, Rose.”

“But, I’m...”

“You don’t need to comfort me. You just need to be by my side.”

I wanted to believe every single piece of my true feelings was getting across to her. I wanted to believe there was no falsehood in anything I said to her. That’s because I believed I could never fully express my gratitude to these two girls.

In the end, I could only smile bitterly at the present situation; I could do nothing more than cling to her very existence like this.

“Sorry, let me stay like this for a while.” I didn’t know whether I wanted to stay this way to convince her or whether I wanted to feel peace of mind. As such, I had no intention of letting go. “Or do you maybe dislike this?”

“By no means. I could... never dislike this.” Her wooden arms timidly wrapped around my back, and Rose shyly returned my embrace. “On the contrary, I’m so happy that it’s frightening.”

“I see.”

I leaned against Rose and shut my eyes. After staying like that for a while, my consciousness began drifting away. Drowsiness rapidly began to unravel my body and mind. I was like a child falling asleep once they relaxed... but there was no point in trying to keep up appearances in front of Rose anymore.

I let my consciousness go. This time, I was sure I wouldn’t see any nightmares.

Chapter 11: Horror

The following day.

“Morning, Master.”

“...Morning.”

I ended up falling asleep in Rose’s arms. When I woke up, Lily greeted me with a strangely happy smile. It seemed she was pleased her little sister Rose was getting along with me. I had wondered how things would go when Rose started calling Lily her older sister, but it turned out she was an unexpectedly good big sister.

“We’re moving our base? Why?”

After finishing breakfast, I cut right to the chase. Lily, who was clinging to my arm as if that was where she belonged, looked up at me while blinking curiously.

“Is this about what you heard from... that senpai yesterday?”

Unlike Lily, Katou immediately had an idea of what was going on.

Rose was listening to our conversation, but she didn’t show any signs of joining in. She just sat there carving away at wood as always.

I nodded back to Katou and then turned to Lily. “If what Kaga told us yesterday is true, then it’s possible there’s a monster powerful enough to kill a cheater in the area. It’ll be dangerous to stay here.”

“Oh, right. He did say something about an exploration team member being among those five torn up corpses, huh...? But is that really true? I can’t really trust that guy.”

“I don’t really trust him either,” I replied as I shrugged my shoulders. “But it’s not worth taking the risk.”

Lily was basically saying there was no evidence, but I judged that Kaga was speaking the truth regarding this matter. For example, Kaga’s other statement of knowing the details behind the first expeditionary force’s plans was surely a lie. He only made such a statement to get my interest. In contrast, he had nothing to gain from claiming he found a bunch of corpses and identified one of them as a cheater.

Kaga was an idiot who was faithful to his own desires, but he wasn’t a braggart who lied for no reason. Assuming one of those five corpses was in fact a cheater from the exploration team was our best course of action. Even if they were a completely common warrior, they were supposed to possess enough strength to easily kick about a large majority of the monsters in the forest. Just the thought of how

powerful a monster had to be to kill them sent a chill down my spine. I wanted to get far away from that kind of danger as quickly as I could.

“But still, a monster that can kill even a cheater, huh?” Lily said.

It was quite unbelievable, but the truth was the truth. I had also considered the possibility they were surrounded by multiple monsters, but there weren’t any monsters corpses there. It was right to assume a single monster had carried out that massacre.

“Is it that strange?” Lily asked.

“Do you not find it strange, Lily? The cheaters who came to this world can defeat a dragon with their bare hands. I can’t even think of what kind of monster would be capable of killing them.”

“So you say, but even monsters have different grades and all.”

“Grades?”

“Mm.” Lily rubbed her cheek against my arm as she nodded.

“What do you mean?”

“Hmm, how to put it?” Lily thought it over for a moment before starting her explanation. “You know the beings the students who were transported to this world call monsters are said to be creatures who possess mana, right?”

“Yeah.”

“Fundamentally, the more mana a monster possesses, the stronger it is.”

This I knew. A regular bear could never win against a mouse with mana. That was an extreme example though.

“So, the average strength of a monster is proportional to the amount of mana in the land.”

“Hang on. What do you mean by mana in the land?”

“Hm? Oh, right. You can’t sense mana, can you, Master?” Lily playfully stuck out her tongue like she messed up. “That which we call mana comes from the earth. It moves with the flow of the atmosphere, soaks into the ground with the rain, and takes root within the earth. That’s mana. And the ones who absorb it from the earth into their bodies are called monsters. That’s what kind of creatures we are.”

“Uhhh... To put it simply, it’s something like harmful heavy metals discharged from factories?”

Lily scrunched up her face. “...You’re right. I reaaaally want to deny it. But you’re right.”

Well, it really was the worst way to imagine it, but it did explain the phenomenon itself. Heavy metals dissolved underwater; they were absorbed by plankton, which was eaten by small fishes, which were eaten by larger fishes. They gradually accumulated like that until they brought harm to humans.

“The small animals and vegetation of this forest also contain

mana, though in minuscule quantities. It is, of course, also in the air. And monsters continuously accumulate the mana around them. Actually, it might be more accurate to say monsters are creatures who accumulate mana rather than just possess it. Mana is absorbed from the land, so naturally, lands which are overflowing with mana are home to monsters who possess that much more of it.”

“You sure are well-informed.”

“Well, yeah. This is a matter which concerns our own ecology, after all.”

“Your ecology?”

“Mm.” Lily nodded. “Certain specimens who can accumulate mana over a certain limit... or, more precisely, who have the capacity to endlessly accumulate mana, become able to start reproductive activities after living for a long period of time. Put simply, they begin giving birth to offspring.”

“...I see.”

What’s this feeling?

Something about hearing a beautiful girl like Lily talk about “reproductive activities” felt kind of iffy. I knew she was being serious, though.

“I guess you would call it asexual reproduction. Oh, but monsters born like that have a slight difference in mana capacity, so maybe it’s a little different? Sorry, I don’t really know about that part. Anyway, slimes like me and magical puppets like Rose should fall under that category. I don’t know about more animal-like monsters like firefangs, though.”

“Meaning... depending on the amount of mana stored in the land, monsters with too large a capacity for mana can’t get enough of it to propagate?”

“Yup. That’s why the strength of monsters in a region is dependent on the amount of mana in the land. That only applies to normal monsters, though.”

“Normal monsters?” Meaning there were also abnormal monsters.

“To make things simpler, I’ll use Mizushima Miho’s knowledge about video games, but... For example, the monsters who can reproduce the way I just mentioned are something like queen monsters, I guess?”

“So, they’re obviously a bigger threat than normal monsters.”

“By a fair margin. However, they lose mana each time they reproduce. Their strength isn’t fixed. And next, there are monsters like me... Something like a unique monster?”

“By unique, you mean there aren’t any other monsters like you?”

“Yup. We’re irregulars born of asexual reproduction... so-called mutants. Well, you can just think of them as curiosities. Being unique

doesn't necessarily make them strong. Especially me. I'm just a unique monster on the level of a slime."

It was true Lily's original combat abilities weren't high by any stretch of the imagination. On the other hand, her mimicry was incomparable to anything else. In that sense, the label of unique monster was truly fitting for her.

"So, Rose is something like a rare monster, I guess."

"What? Rose isn't a normal monster?" I reflexively shot a look over to Rose in surprise, and she modestly nodded back.

"Rose is just a little stronger than normal magical puppets. Haven't you had that hunch before?"

"...Now that you mention it, yeah. I've admired how skilled she is."

"They're nothing compared to the skills of my elder sister."

So Rose said, but I didn't think so at all.

Lily smiled with a troubled look at her little sister but continued her explanation. "And then we have the ones beyond rare monsters... Maybe we should call them high monsters."

"How are they different from rare monsters?"

"In every way possible," Lily clearly declared. "I'm sorry to say this, but the ones I call rare monsters like Rose are nothing more than superior specimens among a large group of the same kind of monster. That in itself is rare enough to have pride in. Something like one in a thousand? For example, it's enough that they'll probably one day become queens... However, the very existence of a high monster is on an entirely different level to begin with."

Lily was making a scarily serious expression.

"They exist outside the ecosystem. In other words, they're specimens who don't take up reproductive activities like queens do. It's likely they've broken through the limits of accumulating mana."

"And the amount of mana a monster stores determines their strength, huh?"

"Mm. That's why we'd never be able to win against one. You can't fight them. Opposing them is certain death. Even running away is a matter of luck. For example, the one I saw before annihilated a pack of nearly a hundred firefangs. It was truly a horror."

"A high monster. A monster among monsters... A horror..."

It wouldn't even be funny to have to fight something like that. Considering it was obvious to run away immediately upon finding one, it really was best to move the base to make sure we didn't encounter one to begin with.

With our plans for the future determined, I suddenly realized something.

"Hey, Lily?"

“Mhm?”

“Those high monsters you mentioned... Could they kill cheaters?”

Our talks had gone a little off track, but this all started because a monster had killed a cheater among those mangled corpses we found.

“...Hmmm, that’s the thing,” Lily replied in a somewhat vague tone. “It really depends on the situation... But I think it’d be hard for the monster in a straight-up fight.”

“So it’d be hard...”

“Mhmm.”

I could do nothing but sigh at her answer. It gave a glimpse of how beyond the norm cheaters were. They truly were humans to be feared.

“But there might be powerful monsters I don’t know about. I’m just a slime. I didn’t have a very wide habitat. Rose might know more, though.”

“No. I’ve only seen these unique and rare monsters you mentioned, and only when you include the both of us.”

From what they were saying, the probability of encountering a high monster was fairly low. Despite that, it was safer to be careful. It was too late to regret it in hell after dying.

“In any case, we should get away from here as soon as we can, seeing that such a monster might be around. Sorry about that, Katou.”

I wrapped things up and shot a look over to Katou. If we waited here, we’d probably encounter the exploration team. Once we moved base, though, we’d be right back to where we started regarding this matter.

Katou quietly looked down to the floor and twiddled her hair. She didn’t look all that dejected. Or rather, she wasn’t showing any emotion at all, just as usual. It did appear she had recovered a fair bit, but she was still far away from being back to normal. It was doubtful whether she would even be able to completely recover her spirit to begin with. It would’ve been nice if there was some sort of chance to help her do so, but it didn’t seem like I would be able to offer such a thing.

“I don’t really mind... Please prioritize your safety.”

“I’m grateful you’d say that. Alright, let’s get out of here quickly then.”

Now that things were decided, the rest went by quickly. We gathered together all of our stuff. Rose handled the equipment she had been making: swords, spears, axes, shields, and armor. She kept her battleaxe in one hand and a spare on her back, and she passed Lily the spear she had been using. I had the sword she made me before at my hip and my large shield in hand to protect my body.

We were all wearing a breastplate, and everyone other than me

had a small buckler that wouldn't get in the way of fighting. I did actually want to give Katou a large shield like mine so she could use it as a wall, but even though the wood was light, it wasn't something she could make practical use of with her physical strength, so we had to give up on it.

I had Rose make all sorts of other tools which would be useful for everyday life, but it would've been troublesome to take them all along, so we decided to leave them. Rose could just make them again. It would end up consuming her time, but she didn't really seem to mind and approved of this plan.

We stored all of our spare clothes in the backpack we stole from Kaga and the handbag Katou had with her, and we packed our dried meat in a leather bag made from the firefang's hide. Rose's spare parts and equipment were also wrapped up in leather.

"Anything we forgot? Okay, let's get going."

Thus, we left the cave that we had grown accustomed to behind.



A tree branch vigorously struck the ground. It was like a whip cracking with enough force to greatly gouge out the earth. It could have destroyed an entire passenger vehicle even. I would've been nothing but a red stain on the ground.

The reason I managed to barely evade such a blood-chilling attack was because of the wooden puppet running through the forest—Rose.

"Haah!"

The instant she landed, Rose charged with tremendous spirit toward the majestically large monster called a treant. Simply put, it was a walking tree. At well over four meters tall, it was a fair bit larger than Lily even when she was in her original form. Watching it mow down the trees around it was like watching a building collapse and cause a chain reaction.

However, Rose charged such an enormous enemy without hesitation. She severed the branch which swooped in on her flank with her axe, and she evaded the other by greatly swaying her body.

"?!"

But just as she did, the branch, hot on her heels, chased her like a snake.

"Hngh!"

Rose just barely managed to block it with her shield. But even though she managed to defend against the attack, her posture was now broken. The treant's countless roots, which it used instead of legs, wriggled about as if to take chase.

"Lily!" Rose yelled.

"I know!"

Lily had completed her preparations while Rose stalled for time. She had a glowing glyph in the palm of her hand, ready to fire her specialty magic from the rear. Its attribute was wind; its nature was that of a bullet. The mana she poured into it made it a grade 3 spell. It possessed enough force to rival a high caliber rifle.

An eardrum-shattering roar broke out, and a portion of the treant's body tore apart.

"Graah?!"

Its thick trunk was so large that two adults wouldn't be able to wrap their arms around it, and half of it had been blown away entirely. Unable to bear such a severe attack, it halted its surging onslaught of strikes.

Rose didn't overlook this chance and brandished her battleaxe overhead.

"Haah!"

She drove her axe into the large hole Lily created. In place of a death cry, the treant's wood creaked apart, and its enormous body splendidly smashed into two as it fell to the ground with a thud.



"Our battles have stabilized a fair bit, huh?" I muttered as I pushed away the branches in my face. The gallant figures of my servants handily defeating the treant remained in my mind.

"Our first battle was pretty harsh, wasn't it? I was totally ready to die," Lily said as she walked next to me. She had a distant look as she recalled the same scene I was thinking of.

"Yeah, me too. My heart pretty much stopped the moment Rose showed up."

"I'm sorry I frightened you."

"Oh, it's fine. I'm not blaming you or anything. We managed to get out of there alive thanks to you. Good work in the battle just now too."

"You honor me."

"That obviously goes for you too, Lily."

"Ahaha. I had the easy job, though."

"What are you saying, Sister? I was able to relax and fight at the front precisely because you were there to protect our master to the rear. That role is far larger than anything I did."

After our battle with the treant ended, we continued walking through the forest while discussing what had happened. We were going in the direction of the sun. For convenience's sake, we had decided this way was east. To be more precise, we were heading in the opposite direction of the Colony.

I think. Probably. Maybe... My sense of direction isn't great, but Rose

is leading us, so it shouldn't be a problem.

We were walking through a forest where the sky was barely visible, but depending on changes in elevation, we could sometimes see a mountain range in the distance. Apparently, the first expeditionary force had used a conspicuously large mountain, reminiscent of Mount Fuji, among those as a landmark as they marched on.

We heard this from Katou, which she had gotten from the exploration team member Takaya. Going the same direction as the expeditionary force meant we were distancing ourselves from the Colony. In other words, we were getting away from the region around that cave, the region which showed signs of an atrocious high monster lurking about.

Five days had quickly passed since we left the cave. It felt like we had covered quite a distance. It would've been impossible for us humans to so easily traverse such a dense forest, but because Lily and Rose, whose physical strength and endurance couldn't even be compared to a human's, were making the path for us, we had it easy. Even Katou, who had the least endurance among us, was giving it her best. It actually felt like she was pushing herself too hard, to the point where we needed to show her some consideration.

Our biggest concern was having to sleep outside in the forest. Lily and Rose didn't require sleep, so they stood on watch. I slept in Lily's arms, while Katou slept close to Rose, who silently worked away at making herself spare parts. Fortunately for us, we had yet to be attacked by monsters in the middle of the night.

"Let's call it a day here."

Evenings in the forest came quickly. With no sense of night vision, we humans lost our footholds the moment the sky darkened, and the danger of having an accident escalated quickly. As such, we began our preparations to camp for the night while it was still light out, just as we had been doing for the past few days.

We started by finding an appropriate place. Then, Lily turned back into a slime and ate the small vegetation around us. After securing enough of an open space within the dense forest, Rose immediately went to work to set up a campfire.

Starting a fire came with the major risk of attracting attention. Nonetheless, we decided it was far more dangerous for the two humans to be completely blind in the dark. We were of course careful to select locations where the light wouldn't leak out as much. The forest had many obstructions, and we never knew where danger lurked, but it was useful in situations like these.

Having gotten fairly accustomed to it, we managed to acquire

some food without spending too much time. Thus, we formed a circle around the crackling fire and began eating.

Incidentally, the wood Rose cut down for us burned very well. Green wood was supposed to burn pretty poorly, but hers ignited rather easily. This was evidently also some sort of magical power she possessed. It was quite convenient.

“...Okay. Fortunately, all of us are still safe. Let’s continue being careful and keep it up,” I said after our meal.

“You’re right. This may actually be where it really begins,” Lily replied with a nod.

Up until now, we had only ever encountered single monsters, but this was mostly because the exploration team had hunted the monsters in the area to near extinction. That was actually another reason we were heading in the same direction as the first expeditionary force. We hoped their efforts to kick out the monsters meant we would encounter fewer monsters ourselves.

“It’s fine and all that we ran away from the cave ’cause there might be some dangerous monster about, but we do have to consider how far is far enough,” Lily added.

“You’re right. Things have been going smoother than planned. We’ll have to start thinking about settling down.”

“How about keeping up the pace and following the expeditionary force out of the forest?”

“That works if it’s doable, but wouldn’t it actually be pretty hard for us?”

My sense of futility weighed heavier than my fatigue from spending several days walking through this ever-unchanging forest. I didn’t know how it was for Lily and Rose, but this was quite a mental burden for humans.

And with a weakened spirit, the journey was all the more dangerous. My fatigue was, of course, also accumulating. Even without being attacked by monsters, humans could easily die just from taking a wrong step on a sloped surface here. We couldn’t be too careful.

“It’s only been five days since we left the cave, but maybe it’s about time for us to set up a new base.”

“If that’s what you’ve decided, Master, then I’ll comply.”

“At the very least, we should rest a bit before continuing. I’m actually quite exhausted. I’m well aware I’m dragging you guys down. I don’t want to cause any fatal mistakes.” I grilled the dried lizard and monster meat we had over the fire once more and took another bite.

Food was also another problem. I wanted to maintain as much of an emergency store as we could, but it was hard to procure more stores of food as we traveled. We really needed to settle down

somewhere, stockpile some food, and recover our stamina sufficiently. The best situation would be finding somewhere similar to the cave we were using before.

“Now that I think of it, Majima-senpai, there’s something that’s been on my mind...” Katou held a lizard in her hands that was burnt to a crisp and spoke.

Katou was fundamentally taciturn. I didn’t know whether she was always like that or whether she ended up like that, but she largely sat to the side and simply listened to me talk with Lily. Even though Rose finally gained the ability to speak, she didn’t like to assert herself by nature, so it was the norm for Lily and I to do most of the talking.

Seeing it was so unusual for Katou to speak, Lily and I turned to her at the same time.

“What is it?”

“What’s up?”

“Aah, um...” Katou was wrapped up in the sheets we took from the hut while cradling her knees and fidgeting awkwardly. “It crossed my mind a little hearing you talk about your plans from now on...”

“What?”

“...Have you ever thought of going back to our world, Senpai?”

In a certain sense, that question was a bomb. Lily, who was leaning up against me, trembled with a small jolt. Rose looked up from the wood she was carving and directed her gaze toward me. They were both easy-to-understand reactions. That was just how important this topic was.

“Not really.” In contrast to the seriousness of the topic, my reply was remarkably unenthusiastic.

Perhaps finding this unexpected, Katou, who usually didn’t show much expression, opened her eyes wide in shock. “Is... that so?”

“Yeah.” I bit off the leg of the cooked lizard in my hand and chewed it down before continuing. “I guess when we first came to this world, it was pretty much all I thought about.”

“So...”

“However, now I have these two with me.” I gently brushed Lily’s head.

“...Master,” Lily called me in an unusually reserved voice, “if you wish to return, then we...”

“Aah, no, that’s not what I’m getting at. Sorry, I put it the wrong way.” I pulled Lily’s upper body toward me as she sat there with a worried look. “I want to be with both of you.”

“Master...”

“That kind of supposition is useless to begin with, isn’t it? Deciding whether to return is futile until after we actually know there’s a way back. We don’t have a single clue as to whether it’s

possible right now, and before that, it's taking everything we have just to survive through each day. We don't have the room to search for such means."

It wasn't like I never thought of my parents or siblings I had left behind in that world. I wanted to at least inform them I was alright. Yet that didn't mean I ever thought of letting go of that which was dear to me over here either.

It was a pretty serious dilemma, but fortunately enough, it was nothing but a "what if" in the current situation. Finding a way to survive in this world was absolutely more of a priority than searching for the potentially non-existent possibility of being able to go back to our world. That said, even if I accepted having to live here, living in this dangerous forest was a different problem altogether. I feared we would eventually reach a limit.

There was in fact a danger of being killed by monsters at any moment, but the problem of food was also severe. We were just barely able to eke out a living as it was, but lately the problem of nutrition had been on my mind. Back in the Colony, we had berries and such that we confirmed were edible, but it really felt like we had a shortage of vitamins in our diet.

Based on Mizushima Miho's memories, Lily said if we were to keep up this lifestyle for too long, our bodies would likely break down. I wasn't particularly knowledgeable about such things, but when she explained it to me using the extreme case of scurvy, I more or less understood the severity of the situation.

All things considered, we would have to go through the forest and make contact with the human world at least once. What to do after that was something to consider when it actually happened. I had no idea whether or not the people of this world would accept a monster tamer like me. I sometimes worried whether there truly was a safe place for us in the world...

"...Master. Please be careful."

Just then, Rose, who had been keeping silent all this time, warned me in a hushed voice. At the same time, Lily, who was snuggling against me, tensed up and raised a brow. She sniffed at the air. She was searching the area by mimicking the sense of smell of a firefang.

"I sense the presence of multiple monsters. We're surrounded," Rose said.

"Got it."

I immediately rose halfway to my feet and grabbed the large shield I had laying nearby. I was already wearing all my protective gear. As a precautionary step, we had been sleeping with them on.

Lily took her spear in one hand and prepared to deploy magic, while Katou came over to me. Rose was already standing at the ready

with her battleaxe. This much we were used to. It took us only a few seconds to prepare ourselves for battle.

“...Grrr.”

Two firefangs appeared through the sea of trees.

“Please keep an eye out. There’s one more out there.”

Rose carefully remained on guard and pointed her featureless face in the opposite direction of the two wolves. She had said we were surrounded earlier. And just as she implied, one more firefang crawled out of the bush it was hiding in.

They were presumably planning a surprise attack but had determined that it had failed. Nevertheless, the firefangs didn’t show any signs of withdrawing. They judged they had the upper hand in this situation.

“Three in total. This is a little bad,” I muttered.

This was our first encounter with multiple monsters at once. We had fought firefangs on multiple occasions, but each time we did, we only had to fight one of them. And now there were three. I had assumed this would happen one day, but it was difficult to retain my composure with the situation thrust before me like this.

“We need to somehow get rid of one of them as fast as possible...”

With that, it would end up being an even field in terms of numbers. It was easy to say but difficult to accomplish. If we were capable of doing so, then this wouldn’t be so tough.

I held my breath and watched the wolves steadily circle around us like sharks.

Looks like they’ve picked their target... Shit, it’s clearly me and Katou.

It seemed their predatory senses could sense our weakness. In which case, the situation was pretty bad. It was standard in a fight to prod at the weakest point.

I gulped loudly. We only had Lily and Rose on our side. Were they able to make it through this critical situation? It would be one thing if they weren’t shackled with two dead weights, but the current predicament really did appear too much for them to bear.

My anxieties passed to them.

“It’s alright, Master.”

“Please be at ease, Master.”

“We’ll keep you safe, even if we die.”

“I shall protect your life with mine.”

Lily and Rose could sense my fear through our mental path. That’s why they reassured me so. And their feelings also got through to me—their sense of absolute resolve to protect me no matter what and their strong will to do anything to accomplish that.

The feelings they bore washed away the cowardice dominating my heart. In its stead, I was suddenly inspired with the courage to face

the dire situation before me.

“Lily... Rose...”

I tightly clenched my fist and made a show of forcing my stiffened lips to smile. It was far too awkward to be called a bold smile, but this was the most I could do to make a show of courage and the only way for me to answer their consideration.

“Don’t be ridiculous, we’re all going to survive,” I declared.

“Mm!”

“Acknowledged!”

We wouldn’t lose, no matter the foe. That’s what I believed. My belief was decidedly passed to them through our mental path and granted them power.

“Lily, take care of one of them as fast as you can. Rose, I’d like you to protect us while somehow keeping the other two at bay. Katou, stay close to me!”

Nothing would come from waiting. I made my decision and gave out my orders. If all three of them were to target myself or Katou, it would surely be difficult to protect us. As such, I decided to have our strongest combatant, Lily, take the initiative and defeat one of them as quickly as possible. During that time, Rose could stall using her excellent combat skills. I believed in them and was going to do everything I could not to be a hindrance. That was about all I could do, after all.

“Alright, go!”

At my command, Lily charged forth with a glyph in her palm. Rose stood on guard in front of us as our shield and refused to yield an inch.

“Graaargh!”

It wasn’t like the wolves waited for my command or anything, but one of them moved to intercept Lily while the other two came charging at myself and Katou.

“Haah!”

“Hyah!”

“Graaawr!”

And the instant the five monsters collided...

“...Huh?”

An ominous white shadow crossed my field of vision.

“Grawh?!”

I witnessed something unbelievable. One of the firefangs that leapt in the air toward us, jaws wide open and ready to spit out flames, lost its posture in a completely unnatural way. In the next instant, the giant body of the two-meter-tall wolf suddenly flew away to the side.

The wolf in question undoubtedly had no idea what happened to

its own body. It flew off toward a large tree with the speed of a bullet and crashed headfirst. An eerie red flower blossomed in the night, and unable to withstand the impact, the tree fell to the ground with a tremor.

Nobody had a grasp of what exactly just happened.

“Grrr...?”

Everyone came to a complete stop. The other firefang who was charging forward noticed something and looked straight up. But it was too late.

“Grah?! ”

“Something” fell down on top of it. The wolf let out an agonizing cry as it was crushed. It didn’t even twitch after that.

“What... the...?” I muttered as the “thing which fell down” stared me in the eyes. It was a pure white spider. An enormous spider with bushy white hair covering its entire body. It had sharp talons at the ends of its eight legs, and one such talon was skewering the head of the firefang it landed on.

“No way... is this...?”

The giant white spider, who could surpass three meters in height if it stretched out its legs, had something fantastical atop its thorax that shouldn’t have been there. It was the upper body of a young woman. She had long, thin hair which resembled spider silk, and she stared right at us with a sweet smile on her face.

Chapter 12: The White Spider's Tyranny

The air itself seemed to freeze over. The only things moving were the swaying bonfire and the shadows born of it. Our gazes were all affixed to the sudden intruder.

“...An arachne?”

The name reflexively spilled from my lips. I'd heard it spoken back at the Colony. It was a monster said to be a giant spider with the monstrous figure of a woman coming out of its upper body.

It was pretty common in games to have monsters with a half-human form. However, among the monsters of this world, at least in the area of the Colony, only the arachne had an appearance close to that of a human.

Even so, it was impossible to mistake an arachne for a human. That wasn't just because of its unsightly lower body. As the description “a giant spider with the monstrous figure of a woman coming out of its upper body” would imply, it was the woman's appearance which was far more monstrous than anything else.

Their mouths stretched all the way to their ears; two large fangs peeked out from their lips. Their eyes were closer to circular cavities, and they had no eyelids. The whites of said eyes were blood red. The surface of their skin looked stiff, and their tremendously skinny bodies displayed an unnatural bony structure within. Even if their lower bodies were completely severed, there was no way anyone could mistake an arachne's corpse for that of a human.

If arachnes did more closely resemble humans, then it wouldn't have been out of the question for some exploration team members to hesitate while hunting them. It was entirely possible for casualties to be born from such a mistake. There was in fact precedent for this sort of error of judgment.

The exploration team was composed of cheaters. Even though they possessed tremendous power, they fundamentally lacked any combat experience. So when encountering a monster they had never seen before, there were times when casualties arose from the ensuing battle. There was one instance where students killed in such an encounter turned into undead monsters. Unable to kill monsters who looked like their former friends, even more students died.

Be that as it may, I had never heard of such precedent with an

arachne. On the contrary, it had such a monstrous form it triggered a strong sense of revulsion, to the point where exploration team members often talked about it.

That was the monster known as an arachne that I knew about. But the one before my eyes was completely different from what I'd heard. The woman atop the pure white spider was far from monstrous. You could even say she looked sweet. Her facial features still had the appearance of a young girl. She didn't look any older than twenty. The only thing inhuman about her was her red eyes, but those didn't give off a monstrous feeling either.

She was wearing faintly transparent clothing that seemed to be made of spider silk and somewhat resembled chiffon fabric. It didn't hide the elegant lines of her body at all. She looked dainty, yet she had beautiful curves. It was as if she was a work of art designed to tempt men. There was no room for objection. She was a beauty. That truth even overshadowed the fact she was growing out of an enormous, monstrous spider.

"Heehee."

A smile escaped her bright red lips as she slowly cast her red eyes over each of us. I could intuitively tell that she was here looking for something. But what? Or maybe, who? The moment that thought came to mind, the alarm bells clanging in my head grew even louder. Before I knew it, her red eyes were upon me.

She squinted. "...Found you."

Even though she had the clear voice of a girl, I felt a shiver run across my skin. I was convinced through pure instinct that this was the calamity we never wanted to meet. In other words, a high monster. The white spider before my eyes was a genuine horror who completely surpassed the term monster.

"Run aw—?!" My words vanished into thin air before I could finish saying them. "Ugh... Oooh?!"

The moment I felt something slam into my right side, a terrific force pulled on my body. I tried to reflexively fasten myself to the ground, but I couldn't resist the force at all. My body should've been as heavy as any other 17-year-old boy, but I floated in the air. At the same time, I heard a hair-raising noise come from the right side of my body which was under an enormous amount of stress.

"Agh, gah...?!"

A sharp pain ran through my system. It jolted my vision.

"...! ...?!"

My voice wouldn't come out. Something was broken. It hurt so much I had no idea where the pain was even coming from. My waning consciousness was barely held together by my fear, by a sense of danger which told me I couldn't faint. But it wasn't able to hold on

forever.

I looked down. There was a white adhesive substance stuck to me from my arms to my chest. It was a spider web. It stretched out into a long, long thread... which was connected to the arachne's hand.

The arachne must have pulled me toward her using that thread. The same thing likely happened to the firefang who was caught in midair and smashed head first into a tree. Meaning, if this arachne felt so inclined, she could also turn me into a red stain on a tree. The danger of that happening had yet to pass, though. My life was in the hands of a terrifying horror. There was no way my companions were just silently watching.

"Master!"

The first one to leap into action to save me from the white arachne's hand was Rose. She did so without hesitation. She was nearest to me, about five meters from where the arachne had me trapped, but such a distance was nothing to her. By the time I saw her move, her axe was already coming down.

"Release my—"

In the next instant, she vanished from my sight.

"—Gyah?!"

Rose screamed in anguish. She was blown away into a bush, her wooden body clanking about. I could only watch in shock. I knew what happened, but I didn't want to accept it. All the white arachne did was casually thrust out one of her legs. That was all. And she absolutely crushed Rose.

I didn't even have the time to worry about her because the white arachne began running at a terrifying pace. I couldn't move the right side of my body because of my injuries, and I couldn't put up any sort of meaningful resistance. Not that I could do anything against an enemy who brought Rose down in a single attack, even if my entire body could move just fine.

The light from the bonfire grew farther and farther away, and the forest around me sank into the night. At the same time, the pain surpassed my limits, and my consciousness was swallowed away by the darkness.

"Masteeeeer!"

The last thing I saw was Lily—on the verge of tears with her hand stretched out toward me.



The bubble of my consciousness burst as it touched the surface of water between dream and reality. A chill assaulted me as I woke. I began trembling, my eyes only half-open. A moment later, I recalled what happened right before I had lost consciousness.

“Where...?!”

My body shot up off the ground in a hurry.

“Argh!”

An intense pain suddenly ran down my right side, causing me to groan, and I fell back to the ground.

“Ugh... Gah... Haah... U-Ugh...”

After ten seconds or so, I somehow managed to get my breathing back in order and then took a look at my body. The sight had me completely in shock. Scraps of my shirt clung to my upper body, and my right side was in a disastrous state.

First off, the contour of my wrist was weird. Some of my fingers were bent the wrong way. I'd heard ribs were easy to break, and they were screaming in pain as if to reinforce that fact. Moreover, my ankle was probably twisted. I could feel a throbbing pain from my foot.

It was fortunate I was numb to half the pain, perhaps because the worst had passed while I was unconscious. But I couldn't really move like this. Not that I could do anything even if I could move. I was completely incapable of fighting on my own, after all. I was completely powerless. Realizing that, my body began trembling violently.

It's cold... It's so cold... I feel like I'm going to freeze to death... Lily... Rose...

The two of them weren't anywhere nearby. I couldn't sense their presence through our mental path like I had all this time. I didn't think such a feeling would leave me so hopeless.

“...Shit. Don't lose your nerve.”

I scolded my own heart for wanting to curl up into a ball in fear. I had a responsibility as Lily and Rose's master. They were surely worried about me. I had to get back to them and let them know I was okay.

As it was, I could have died while I was unconscious. It was good luck that I was even alive, taking that into consideration. Such a thought might have only provided a temporary peace of mind, but even so, I had to at least avoid descending into a panic. As such, I encouraged my weakened heart and took a look around me as I got myself back up.

“This is...”

“This is my nest.”

A bewitching voice answered my mumbling. I froze and then slowly turned around. A girl with pure white hair as thin as threads was right there looking down at me.

“Y-You're...”

The girl was resting her chin on the hair of her white spider legs as she gazed at me with a playful look. There was no mistaking it.

This was the arachne who attacked me right before I lost consciousness.

“Your... nest...?”

I only just noticed I wasn't lying down directly on the ground. There was a wooden floor beneath me. It was a bit of a disorderly mess of reasonably sized logs thrown atop a spider web, but it was in fact a floor about the size of a small gymnasium.

I had been put to rest in a space which felt relatively level. Just maybe, this spider was showing consideration toward my injuries. It was fatal to continue under the assumption she was showing me sympathy, though.

Multiple trees were used as natural pillars for the nest. There were no walls, but there was a ceiling which looked to be supported by a spider web. There were cocoons dangling from the ceiling by threads; mysterious red lights flickered within them, which dimly lit the nest.

It seemed I was dragged all the way back to her home. Not only that, I was all on my own. It was a hopeless situation.

“What do you plan to...?”

I faced the white arachne once more and unconsciously gulped. Fear froze my heart. Nevertheless, I unreasonably forced my solidified jaws to move.

“...Wait, more importantly... What happened to Lily and Rose?”

The girl laughed in a truly amused manner. “Hmm. So your thoughts move to your servants before your own well-being?”



“Worry not. I have no interest in taking such insignificant lives. There is but one thing I desire.”

“...Me?”

The white arachne nodded. “Indeed.”

It seemed I wasn’t going to get killed right away. After giving it some more thought, it would have been pretty simple for this girl to kill me back there. So, there had to be a reason for her to go out of her way to bring me here. I could only pray it wasn’t for something cruel like taking her time to eat me back at her own nest. I had no way of resisting her if that were the case.

“Why me?” I mustered all my strength to ask.

“Can you not tell? There is no way you cannot. You should know full well *what* I am.”

Even when she put it like that, this was still the first time I met this arachne. There was no way I’d forget seeing the specimen before me. Not only did her appearance stand out, her very existence overwhelmed all others. I could firmly declare I had never met her before. As such, there was no way I could know what she was. Or... there was no way I *should* know.

“...Hang on.”

I immediately denied the one possibility that came to mind. However, I couldn’t misinterpret this feeling within me. It came from my very instincts—from a power which only belonged to me.

“It can’t be... My cheat...?”

“Hmm? I don’t really understand when you put it like that.” The girl then closed one of her red eyes. “But I do believe I am exactly what you think I am.”

Her tone sounded as if she found everything in this world endlessly fun.

“Right, My Lord?” Those simple words lovingly spilled from her bright red lips.

“No way...”

Reality didn’t change no matter how much I denied it. The monster before me was tamed by my cheat.

In other words, she was my servant.

Chapter 13: Working Hand in Hand

~Lily's POV~

“It can’t be...”

I stood there in a complete daze. I couldn’t come to grips with what had just happened. The events that assailed us one after the other were simply far too hectic. We were suddenly attacked by three firefangs. It was a disadvantageous battle, but we still managed to combine our strengths to stand against them.

However, just then, another monster on a clearly different level suddenly joined the fray. According to Mizushima Miho’s knowledge, the monster which looked like a beastly woman sprouting out of an enormous spider was called an arachne back in the Colony. I had seen this kind of monster quite a few times when I was just a slime wandering the forest.

The one we saw this evening, however, was in an entirely different dimension from the ones I had seen before. It was a beautiful, yet ominous, white spider. Just recalling its appearance and what it had done had my hairs standing on end.

The white arachne began by killing two of the firefangs in an instant. And as we stood there in a daze, she captured my master by pulling him away with her threads. I had distanced myself a fair bit from my master so I could intercept a firefang. As such, Rose acted in my stead. Despite this, the white arachne closed the distance between them in a single breath and sent her flying away all too quickly just by thrusting out a single one of its legs.

Arachnes were capable of peculiar attacks using their threads, but in contrast to that, they weren’t supposed to be good in simple, close-quarters combat. And yet, Rose was defeated with a single attack.

A normal arachne wasn’t all that big a threat. But there was no doubt that the one we fought against here was an exception whose strength we could only tremble before. If the fight had gone on, we would have been annihilated.

The only reason that didn’t happen was simply because the white arachne thought nothing of us. After kicking Rose away, she had accomplished her objective and withdrew from the area... with my master in tow.

I immediately tried to take chase, of course. However, the white arachne had set webs all over the place to block our pursuit. Chasing

after an arachne, whose specialty was based on a spider's habit of lying in wait, was far too reckless an endeavor. It might have been possible to keep hot on her heels if I used magic, but there was a danger my master would get caught in the firing line, so I hesitated to use any.

As I got caught by a web and held in place for a few seconds, the giant white spider completely vanished into the darkness of the forest.

With my master... Master... Master, Master, Master, Master, Master, Master, Master, Master, Masteeeeer!

"...oh."

I have to get my master back!

"Rose!" I yelled out the name of my little sister. "You're okay, right?! Answer me! Get up! We have to go after our master!"

She had taken a hit from the arachne, but that wasn't enough to kill her. That's what I believed. The loyalty Rose devoted to our master could even exceed the love I offered him. There was no way she would so shamelessly die when our master was snatched away.

"...My deepest apologies, Lily. I suffered an embarrassing defeat."

Just as expected, Rose came out of the darkness of the forest and answered my call. I was so relieved to see her that I nearly fell over. That's when I realized how uneasy I was.

The fear of losing my cute little sister who I had absolute trust in. The anxiety of having to fight against that powerful monster all on my own. I could feel tears coming to my eyes, a release from the anguish I was trying to turn a blind eye to.

However, now wasn't the time to cry.

"I don't know what to say for myself. I never thought it would take our master away," Rose said.

"The same goes for me. Hang on, I'll heal you right away."

I put my strength back into my relaxed muscles and began casting healing magic on Rose.

"How's that? Can you fight?"

"Yes. But... It seems this arm won't be of any use."

Rose's left arm, which was holding her shield, had a huge hole in it halfway down her forearm. It was just barely held together by a single piece of wood. Notwithstanding any small cracks and warpage, this far surpassed the capabilities of my healing magic.

Rose's shield had snapped in two from being struck head-on. The other half was on the ground where she had taken a hit.

"To think I would be reduced to such a state with a single strike... I feel worthless."

"No, that's not true at all."

On the contrary, it was impressive she managed to defend herself on the spur of the moment. Rose's body would've likely been broken

into pieces if she didn't do so. Even so, such praise would do nothing to comfort her when her master was stolen away. I could feel the scorching vexation in her heart through our mental path.

"This wouldn't have happened if you were the one by our master's side..."

"No way. It would've been the same either way."

I wasn't only saying that to console her. You could certainly say I was the stronger one between us. As a mimic slime, I possessed my natural ability of predation and the mimicry of the abilities of those I ate. Up until now, I had eaten a magical puppet, a firefang, a treant, and Mizushima Miho. I was only an inferior copy to any of the originals, but I was capable of using all of their abilities in tandem. Depending on the circumstances, there was a fairly high chance I could defeat Rose if I could bring all of them to bear.

However, I had no chance against that white arachne. I would surely die 100 times in 100 battles. That's just how large the gap between us was.

"A high monster..."

It was a being completely beyond the classification of a monster. There wasn't supposed to be all that many monsters who could become such a thing in this forest. There was no way myself, a unique monster not suited to battle, and Rose, a rare specimen of a common monster, could possibly win just by combining forces. However, that didn't matter.

"We need to take back our master even if it kills us," I said.

"Of course. I shall save him even at the cost of my life."

Our feelings were in sync. We had to protect our master even if our bodies were brought to ruin. That was the meaning to our lives as servants... Or, at least, it was supposed to be. That's precisely why a certain doubt came to mind.

"That white spider... is a servant just like us."

I thought I was wrong at first, but she was definitely my master's servant. We servants were connected to our master with a mental path, so we were also capable of understanding each other. I felt the white arachne's strong desire with that same connection. To put it into words...

"'This belongs to me...' I could feel her thinking that through our mental path."

Just recalling her violent selfishness sent chills down my back. I could only pray the white arachne's intent in abducting my master wasn't to harm him.

"I also interpreted her purpose in such a way," Rose said with a nod. "I don't know where such avarice came from, but there's no doubting she abducted our master just to satiate her own desire."

“Right. That’s unforgivable.”

“But considering how she stole our master away, I do believe the possibility she will kill him right away is fairly low. That simple fact is a bit of a relief.”

“That may be so... But I don’t think she’s going to show our master sufficient consideration.” I heard a creaking deep in my ear. I ended up grinding my molars before I knew it. “You saw it too, didn’t you? Our master was injured pretty badly when she kidnapped him.”

Fortunately, it didn’t look like anything severe enough to threaten his life, but that didn’t change the fact he was badly injured. I could feel my master’s anguish through our mental path at the time. Remembering it made my stomach boil over.

“Please calm down, Lily.”

“I know!”

After reflexively yelling back, I gnashed my teeth once more. My master was surely suffering. Just thinking of that made me want to run toward him right away.

“Anyway, we need to take chase as soon as—”

Carried by that wave of emotion, I began spurring Rose on, but I was interrupted by someone I had completely forgotten about...

“Lily. Rose. It’s fine to chase after Majima-senpai and all, but is he even still alive to begin with?”

“...! What’s that?!” I shot a glare back toward the voice. “He’s obviously still alive! Don’t be stupid!”

A human, just like my master, stood there before me. It was the younger girl he took under his care. Her name was Katou Mana. She was a close friend of the girl I was mimicking, Mizushima Miho.

Rose stepped forth before I said anything else. “Allow me to apologize, Katou.”

It was quite unusual for her to do so considering she didn’t assert herself much, but she likely did because she could sense how on edge I was. My little sister was acting to save me from worsening the situation, so I stepped down. My heart was, of course, far less calm about it. Even considering my master’s death was an unforgivable act for me.

“We must take chase after our master,” Rose said.

“Yes, I understand that. But as I said, do you have any proof he’s still alive? Or are you simply hoping he is?”

“You—!”

Katou repeated her earlier suspicions, and it resuscitated the burning anger within me. Rose, however, showed no signs of being perturbed.

“Of course, I have conviction that our master is still alive. The fact we servants are still conscious is indisputable evidence of his safety.”

“What do you mean?”

Rose answered Katou’s doubts in an indifferent tone. There was no anger or panic in her voice. She had regained her composure, unlike me.

“Back when we were just monsters, we didn’t possess anything you could call a firm will.”

“Back when you were just monsters?”

Rose continued with a calm voice. “Yes. Back before meeting my master, before becoming his servant, my ego was very weak.”

This was a retelling of an experience that she... no, that all servant monsters went through.

“The memories I have of being a normal monster are dull and uninteresting, as if I’m watching footage of a recording. The moment I established my own self, when I became aware of my own life... on that day, at that time, in that place... as I wandered through the forest as if guided by an unknown hand, is the very moment I met my master.”

Rose’s words had a sense of happiness behind them. That’s how vivid the memories of that moment were to her. It was exactly the same for me.

On that day, at that time, in that cave... I met my master.

At first, I thoughtlessly began eating his arm, but I immediately knew that wasn’t right. This wasn’t something for me to eat. Actually, the fact that I wanted to eat him back then was a secret from even my master.

In any case, after meeting him, after being desired by him, I gained an ego. That instant was the first time I saw color. He wished for me, and my very existence was born to this world. In that sense, if one were to put it in human terms, our master was like a mother to us.

We servants found our master dear to us from the very bottom of our hearts. And fortunately for us, our master loved us right back. Hence, you could say our relationship was much like that of a parent and child. Well, that’s only an easy-to-understand way of verbalizing our relationship in human terms. In truth, our master was our master, a maddeningly dear and absolute existence.

I was born to fulfill my master’s wish. That’s why I was sure my ego would quickly vanish if he were to die. The fact it hadn’t yet meant my master was still alive. He was surely waiting for us to save him even now...

“Rose! Enough of this! We need to get going!”

My entire body was spurred on by impatience. It was to the point where I felt like my heart was liable to burn out.

“But Sister.” In complete contrast, having gotten her emotions

back under control, Rose diligently pleaded with me for blowing my lid. "What do you plan on doing about Katou?"

"...Oh."

That problem had completely slipped my mind. I finally realized the reason Katou was interjecting in our conversation. Actually, it was perfectly obvious for her to do so considering her position. Katou had no future if we left her behind here.

"Our master decided to protect Katou." Rose fiddled with the elbow of her broken arm, pulled it off, and threw it to the ground. "We cannot possibly choose to abandon her by our own discretion, can we?"

She continued to talk to me in a calm tone as she pulled a spare arm out of the firefang leather bag we were carrying all our stuff in.

"B-But... How can we worry about such a thing when our master has been...?"

"That doesn't mean we can make a hasty decision. Are you listening, Lily? We must act calmly precisely because of the severity of the situation."

"I-I'm calm!"

"No, you're not. You have lost yourself, Sister."

"Ugh...!"

Yeah... she's right. I'm not calm. How could I possibly be calm? He's not by my side.

That one fact made me feel like I was going mad. Yet Rose was capable of maintaining her composure, and Katou was also keeping her cool.

"I don't really mind if you choose to leave me behind, though," Katou suddenly declared. We both stopped our conversation and looked at her at the same time.

What does she mean?

I faltered. I had thought she interjected because she sensed we would leave her behind to go rescue our master. In truth, leaving her alone in the forest was pretty much a death sentence for her. She should have been desperate so that we wouldn't abandon her. And yet she claimed she wouldn't mind being left behind. I truly couldn't understand her.

"Katou. May I ask for your intentions in making such a claim?"

Unlike me, who was now full of suspicions, Rose threw a direct question right at her.

"There are no intentions behind it. I simply meant what I said. If you would like to leave me behind, then I don't mind if you go ahead and do so. This is a matter that involves Majima-senpai's life, after all. Nevertheless..." Katou continued indifferently while maintaining her usual expression, "if possible, I would like you to take me along. I

believe I may be able to be of use.”

This was entirely unexpected of her. The reason she wanted to come with us wasn't out of desperation for her own life. She wanted to come help rescue our master. I was completely unable to hide my suspicions of her.

“And what can you possibly achieve by coming with us?”

“At the very least, you'll be able to get by without disobeying your master by bringing me along. Moreover, I can at least serve as a human shield... no, even if I can't be used for that much, you may be able to use me as bait, you know?”

“...”

It was true we would be able to avoid disobeying our master's order by bringing Katou along with us. He was an honest man, so he wouldn't choose to abandon her simply because his own life was in danger. Also, it wasn't hard to imagine my master would receive a terrible shock if she were to die, one which couldn't even be compared to Kaga's death. Conversely, she would be a hindrance to us if we brought her along. It wasn't all that bad an idea to use her as bait in exchange for my master's life, as she had suggested, but...

“...Out of the question. I can't allow it.” I clearly rejected the idea.

“So, it's out of the question. May I ask why?”

“Isn't it obvious? I can't trust you. That's all.”

The pros and cons of bringing her along were based on the assumption that Katou wouldn't betray us. But she wasn't a servant like us. She was a human. Humans were the ones who hurt my master. They betrayed him. I could clearly remember how he looked when he collapsed in pain from that.

Unlike us servants, humans were capable of betrayal. At the very least, we could never discount the possibility. This matter involved my master's life. I had to be doubly sure of everything and be meticulously careful of every threat. Taking an uncertain element like Katou along was unthinkable.

I was against bringing her on our journey to begin with. I simply backed down because my master strongly desired it to be so.

“I can't bring an untrustworthy *human* along in such a dire situation. There's no telling what will happen.”

This was the conclusion I came to.

“Is that so? How unfortunate.”

Katou indifferently accepted my decision without showing much disappointment. This had now left the domain of mere suspicion and distrust. Her calmness was now eerie to me.

“You don't seem all that dejected.”

“You're right. That's because I thought you'd say that, Lily.”

“...What do you mean?” I knit my brows. “You thought I'd say

that? Why?"

"I mean, you've been wary of me all this time, haven't you?" Katou answered as she touched her hair hanging over her shoulder. "Lily, you were clinging to Majima-senpai around the clock to guard him from me, right?"

"..."

I was completely taken aback. It was one thing for her to notice the intentions I had even kept hidden from my master, but I couldn't hide my shock over the fact she brought it up herself. I thought she was nothing more than an empty husk, but both her mind and tongue were working far better than I imagined.

"Well, I'm sure at least half of it was for the side benefits."

"Shut up."

Not only that, her senses were sharp. I continued to question her in a tone even I found thorny. "When did you notice? That I was being wary of you, that is."

"When? From the very beginning. Anyone would notice when you glare at them like that. So, I guess it really is out of the question to bring someone along you're so wary of, huh?"

Everything Katou said was true. I had no choice but to correct my cognition of her. It was hard to read her because she appeared coldhearted and emotionless, but I was in no way unfamiliar with the subtleties of the emotions of the human known as Katou Mana. You could even say I had a very sharp sense for them. On the other hand, you could also say I was unexpectedly careless despite that.

"I'm really surprised you noticed my intentions," I said in a stiff tone. "But what are you trying to get at by pointing that out? You're just fanning my wariness by proving how shrewd you are."

The sharper and more capable she was, the higher the risk of betrayal. She was more liable to do something we couldn't predict. She was increasingly more dangerous for us to bring along.

"Your proposal is rejected. Let's go, Rose."

My conclusion didn't change, and I turned back to my little sister.

"B-But, Sister..."

Rose was still hesitating. Her feelings toward our master tended far more toward loyalty than mine. She felt great hesitation in abandoning an order he had once passed to her. I began choosing the words to convince Rose to do so. However, Katou was quicker than me at voicing her opinion.

"Will you really not bring me along?"

"That's what I'm planning," I rudely replied without even turning to look at her.

"Really?"

"Yes."

“No matter how much I beg?”

“You’re far too dangerous.”

“I see.” I heard an unnatural sigh behind me. “What a plausible opinion.”

“...”

My brow wrinkled. Katou’s way of phrasing things was grating on my already irritable nerves, regardless of whether she was doing it on purpose or not.

“What are you trying to say?” I asked.

“I’m questioning whether that’s truly a rational decision, is all.”

“Meaning?”



I really couldn't continue ignoring her rash remarks and finally turned to look at her. And just as our gazes met...

"?!"

Goosebumps appeared on my fake skin. I didn't know what was happening to my own body. All I did was look at her. Nothing about her had changed. She had a flat tone and a gloomy expression. Nothing about the girl known as Katou Mana had changed from before. As such, there was nothing that should've thrown me into a panic by facing her...

...Or not. There was one definitive difference from before.

Her eyes.

Katou's eyes were different. They were glaring with a fiery blaze of determination. A chill ran down my spine. Thinking back on it, I was being far too careless. Blood had rushed to my brain and I was unable to make a calm decision. That's why I had misread the girl before me. There was no other way of describing it other than foolish.

I truly didn't notice at the time, but this was the very moment the girl known as Katou Mana regained her spirit, faced with the emergency before us.

"Isn't it just because you dislike me, Lily?"

"...Huh?" For some reason, I was unable to say anything back at what could be interpreted as an insult from Katou.

She observed me with her black eyes and cocked her head with sluggish movements. "I can tell. You hate me, right?"

Her words were like a knife stabbing at the softest part of my heart. "Wh-What are you... saying...?"

"I'm telling you I get it."

My attempt to gloss it over was in vain.

"Lily, you're a slime, right? A mimic slime, was it? Your ability is to mimic others. You're using that power to copy Mizushima-senpai. The way you talk, the way you behave, all of it's exactly like Mizushima-senpai. I was quite close to her. I don't know much about you, but I knew Mizushima-senpai down to the minute detail. I can easily see that you hate me just from your behavior."

Don't be ridiculous. So I wanted to say, but Katou's voice was filled with conviction. Moreover, my own heart was accepting what she said. How had I not noticed it before?

What a failure. I never should have made her my enemy. She was sensitive to the subtleties of girls and knew the one I was mimicking very well. She normally just stood there doing nothing, but that time was spent analyzing me as a specimen. And I gave her all the time in the world to do so, too. I was far too poorly matched with her. Just by taking Mizushima Miho's form, Katou's existence became my natural

enemy.

“I-I’m...” In an instant, my burning rage froze over completely. I could’ve easily killed Katou if I felt like it, yet I began to harbor a clear fear toward her.

“I know.” That simple phrase from her proved that the fear dominating my heart was all in the palm of her hand. “Lily, you’re jealous of me, right?”

“Th-That’s not... I-I’m not really... jealous... or anything...”

“That’s a lie. You hate me because you’re jealous of me.”

“S-Stop. I don’t want to hear this.”

This was no good. With such an unpleasant truth thrust before me, I felt like I couldn’t maintain this fake body. I covered my ears and tried to tune her out. However, Katou’s words stabbed me like a knife before I could.

“As for why you’re so jealous... It’s because I’m a human, just like your precious master, right? You’re a monster. Majima-senpai is a human. That’s why you’re endlessly jealous of me.”

Those words dealt the finishing blow. She wasn’t wrong. The emotional part of my mind acknowledged it before the rational part of my mind could form an argument. It was as she said. I was endlessly jealous of the fact that she was a human.

I’m a monster. I’m in the form of a human, but my original body is that of a repulsive beast. I’m simply imitating a human.

I was nothing more than a fake. No matter how much I loved my master, I could never become a human. That’s why I was always worried. “I suppose humans really are best suited for humans.” Such an obvious anxiety always remained in my heart. At the very least, anybody would acknowledge it was obvious.

Right now it was fine. My master hated humans, so a fake like me could remain closer to him than anyone else. It’d become somewhat troublesome to be misunderstood, though. I didn’t need to be the closest to him. I was happy I was, but I didn’t mind yielding that spot to another. That’s because we servants belonged to our master. Our master didn’t belong to us.

I wasn’t going to ask for the luxury of being the closest to him. It was more than enough just to be nearby.

But.

But...

If my master reconciled with humans...

If the deep scars in his heart were to heal...

Wouldn’t he stop keeping a repulsive monster like me by his side?

This wasn’t a groundless fear; I could tell. I was my master’s first servant. The man who was once “a good-natured, serious student” became “my master.” I was there when it happened. That’s how I

knew. I was the only one in the world who knew my true master. When he lay there in tatters, when he despaired at being unable to trust anyone else, when he faced inescapable death, he prayed right before my eyes.

“Someone... save me...”

There was a clear and distinct contradiction to his words. A human who despaired at being unable to trust anyone was now wishing for the aid of “someone” right before his death.

It was impossible.

It was illogical.

It was inconsistent.

Yet, after giving it some thought, it wasn’t all that strange. It was fairly common for one’s sense of values to change when floating on the boundary between life and death. The same applied to my master.

However, could he really overturn his sense of values completely in such a short amount of time? Even if it were possible, would there really be nothing left of his old values? Were the 17 years of his life really so trivial? That really would be making light of his entire life up until now. So, to sum it up simply:

After suffering such deep wounds, my master could no longer trust humans.

On the other hand, even now, my master prayed deep down he could trust others.

That was the fatal contradiction the 17-year-old boy Majima Takahiro possessed.

Such a large contradiction caused strife within his heart, warped it, and created an opening. This would eventually cause it to collapse. We servants simply slid into that opening.

I was always anxious precisely because I was aware of this. Would the day come when I was no longer needed? That was a fear I held close to my heart... but one so big it couldn’t be compared to anything else.

That’s why I was unable to deny Katou’s claim. I couldn’t help but be jealous of humans. Jealousy occupied a large portion of my mind, and it could easily wash away my sense of reason. And if that was why I refused to let Katou, a human, accompany us from here... then it truly was an unsightly reason for doing so. If, for argument’s sake, that was true, then I wouldn’t have the qualifications to stay by my master’s side...

Right as I felt I could no longer maintain my human form and was about to crumble away...

“Please leave it at that, Katou. I thought to simply watch over this until Lily’s head cooled off, but do you not think you’re taking this too far?”

An ever so slightly passionate voice cut loose the threads of tension which had been running between us. I raised my downcast eyes and found a wooden back standing before me.

“Rose...”

My reliable little sister stood between Katou and myself. Rose connected her spare arm to replace the damaged one. A dull clank resounded around us, causing the air in the forest to tremble as if threatened by a beast.

“Please stop sidestepping the topic,” Rose said.

“...What do you mean?”

“Don’t dodge the question. Yes, it may be true Lily hates you. But that is an entirely different problem from us taking you along.” Rose’s usually calm voice was tinged with a rare hint of anger. “You’ve tied two of your goals together and unjustly driven my sister into a corner. As a servant, and as a sibling, I cannot possibly stand by and let that be.”

“...”

Katou remained silent and stared at Rose for a moment. After a few seconds, she let out a single sigh.

“Well, I figured you’d see through it.” She awkwardly relaxed her brow.

And just like that, the overwhelming oppression I felt from her vanished completely.

“Sorry, allow me to apologize. I don’t know if you’ll forgive me, though.”

The one before me now was the usual somewhat gloomy Katou.

“If you’re able to read Lily so well, then you should know she isn’t trying to reject you for such selfish reasons.”

“You’re right. It’s just as you say, Rose,” Katou replied with a casual nod. “She is simply distrustful of me. Her carefulness is born of her care for Majima-senpai. Her jealousy is unrelated to the matter of bringing me along. I won’t deny I forced a connection there myself.”

She easily acknowledged she was shrewdly guiding the conversation. I was only capable of watching things develop from the sidelines after being left behind.

Rose turned on the spot to face me. “...So, that’s how it is, Sister.”

“R-Rose. I’m...”

“Please be at ease. You’re not a selfish person. I can guarantee that,” she said in a significantly softened tone.

Hearing her voice charged with intimacy and sympathy, I was finally able to catch up with the situation. However, it was difficult for me to accept her words as they were.

“B-But, Rose...” She was kind. But that wasn’t enough to dispel the fears in my heart. “I really am jealous of her...”

That girl had keenly revealed the portion of myself that I was trying not to see.

"I now know I may be envious..." I could no longer pretend I didn't. "And if he finds out I possess such repulsive feelings... then our master will hate me."

He once despaired at the filthiness of humans. After watching him sink into such muddy desperation, I wanted to heal his heart. I decided to do so.

That's why I had to be purer than anyone else.

I had shut my eyes to my own envy because I couldn't possibly acknowledge such a thing existed within me. If my master knew about such a filthy part of me, then he might come to hate me.

I was scared of that. It would be more unbearable than anything in the world. Just thinking of him hating me left me endlessly, endlessly scared. I huddled up, trembling in fear. I felt like crying.

"That won't happen." Rose denied what I said as if it were perfectly obvious.

I was left staring blankly at my little sister. "Huh?"

Rose's featureless face was staring right at me, like she was questioning why I would even say such a thing.

"U-Um? Rose...?"

"There is no way our master would come to hate you for such a thing," she told me as she scooped away the tears in my eyes. "As a puppet, I don't understand the subtleties of the human heart. It's difficult for me to say that I understand your sorrow too. However, that's exactly why I think your anxieties are very human."

"Very... human...?" After I had shut myself into that wrong impression, Rose's words were like a revelation to me.

"Our master loves even that part of you. As nothing more than a wooden doll, even I can see that much."

"That's true." Surprisingly, Katou, the one who had driven me into a corner just moments ago, agreed with her.

"Rather than filth, this falls more toward the mundane portion of humanity. I'm sure boys would lose confidence if the person they loved didn't feel any anxiety or fragment of jealousy. A small amount of jealousy is actually kind of cute, in a sense."

"...You're one to talk." She was the one who'd exposed my feelings to begin with. I glared at her resentfully, and Katou averted her gaze. It was quite unusual for her, like the behavior of a normal girl on an ordinary day.

"Oh, um. I didn't expect you to feel so down about it. It would've been fine for you to simply doubt your decision. I didn't really think your understanding was lacking at such a fundamental level..."

Katou suddenly paused. An extremely gentle expression abruptly

appeared on her gloomy face, as if she found something extremely important to her.

As I stood there preoccupied with Katou's sudden change in expression, she continued in her usual light tone. "You sure are just as dense about boys as you always were. Well, I guess that's not all there is to it this time."

"Shut up."

Huh?

I found my own reaction somewhat curious. I'd let it slip because she spoke so naturally, but I felt like Katou had said something quite strange. Moreover, how to put it...? Something just now felt really, really nostalgic.

What was it? I couldn't tell. Even if I tried asking her about it, she had already returned to her usual expressionless self. I continued to stare at her, and she stared right back. In that instant, it felt like we were communicating with our eyes, as if reluctant to part with that small miracle.

"...Now then. With my sister back on her feet, let's return to the original topic. What shall we do about Katou's protection, Lily?"

As always, Rose's cool and collected voice brought me back to reality. I suddenly came back to my senses. I couldn't forget about this. We were in the middle of an emergency situation right now. Though, the fact that I managed to regain my cool meant I couldn't claim this had all been wasted time.

Even so, it didn't change the fact that this was an urgent situation. First, we had to get back to square one. This was naturally my job since I had turned the situation completely chaotic over a prank.

I started by lowering my head to my little sister. "Sorry for losing my cool, Rose. I was overtaken with emotion."

"Lily..."

"I really caused you trouble. I'm very sorry."

I had been completely irrational with worry about my master's safety when he was kidnapped. I really did cause Rose many problems by doing so.

"I don't mind." Rose accepted my apology without showing any undue attention to it. "I'm sure our master wouldn't wish to see you in such a state."

"Mm. You're right. I'll try to be careful." I would be greatly shaken if anything were to happen to him. This incident taught me that full well.

I couldn't become like Rose. However, even if shaken, I should've been able to act rationally. I should've been capable of making efforts so that I could. I admitted that. I was truly inexperienced. And now that I realized this, I had no choice but to grow up.

“So, I’d like to leave all decisions regarding her to you, Rose. Can I?”

“Understood.”

Rose seemed to have predicted I would make such a request and smoothly accepted the task. We were sisters born of our master’s power at almost the same time. We were capable of guessing what the other had to say to a certain extent. It really helped in speeding up conversations like this.

“Is that alright?” Katou asked.

“It’s fine. Rather...” I hesitated and shrugged.

Rose cut in. “The current state of affairs dictates that we have no other choice. You’ve already brought Lily down. The greatest obstacle to fulfilling your objective, my distrustful sister, is no longer confident in her own decisions. Thus, it falls to me to deal with you.”

I was somehow able to come to grips with the jealousy I bore toward Katou. This was all thanks to Rose and... well, I didn’t really want to admit it because she stirred up some trouble, but it was thanks to Katou as well.

But on the other hand, I wasn’t able to wipe away the feeling I would make a selfish decision based on my jealousy. For example, say I chose not to bring Katou along with us. I wouldn’t be confident I did so without jealousy playing a part. I didn’t have enough faith in myself to continue causing problems for Rose by acting on emotions. That’s why I left things to her... Although, this was surely all according to Katou’s plan. Just thinking of that had the seeds of suspicion budding within my doubtful heart.

“I’d rather you not misunderstand me,” Katou replied with a bitter smile, as if she had read my mind. “I didn’t do this because I thought you’d be more naïve, Rose.”

That only stood to reason. The possibility of her getting her way with me was practically zero, but Rose she could at least talk to. Having said that, though it’d seem Rose would be more naïve in this case, reality was an entirely different matter. She wasn’t naïve. She was simply impartial. Unlike me, she wouldn’t make decisions based on her emotions. It’s because of this I was able to entrust her with this decision.

“Then, please go ahead,” I told my reliable little sister.

“Very well. Now then, Katou,” Rose said as she cut right to the chase. “There’s a possibility you’ll be able to come along if you negotiate with me. You were right in your judgment regarding this. In truth, from the very beginning, I planned to bring you along with us. However...” Rose paused for a moment. If she were human, this might have been where she let out a sigh. “Are you not approaching this from the wrong direction? Even if you managed to get Lily to step

aside, there's no gain to it if you make an enemy of me in the process, is there?"

She seemed calm now, but watching Katou drive me into a corner had angered Rose. As a wooden doll, she was fundamentally a rational person, but she wasn't all that familiar with the delicacies of human emotion.

For example, though she could understand how our master suffered over having killed one of his former classmates, she didn't properly comprehend why he suffered so deeply. Having said that, it didn't mean she possessed no emotions of her own. Though she didn't directly witness our master beaten beyond recovery like I did, Rose had a bad impression of those who had hurt him before. She would feel anger if he were being bullied.

To put it bluntly, Katou might have ruined her chances of negotiating with her. That's why Rose found fault with her desperation to do so by any means necessary. In a certain sense, Rose was getting angry for Katou's sake.

Rose's virtue was her faithfulness. She faced everyone fairly and evenly regardless of whether they were human or servant. The anger she showed was something I was incapable of as someone who thought of humans as enemies. Rose might have grasped the nature of the human known as Katou Mana from an entirely different perspective than I did.

"There should have been a more reasonable way of approaching this. I do believe it was possible for you to do so, was it not?"

"For example, using you as leverage to convince her of the matter, you mean?"

"Yes," Rose said with a nod. "My sister may not have listened to me because of the blood rushing to her head... No, I suppose it was pretty much guaranteed she wouldn't listen. Ultimately, she would grow impatient and charge off on her own."

I wanted to say I wasn't that bad... but I couldn't. I had completely lost all sense of reason at the time. If the conversation had gone on for another five minutes, I was very liable to charge off all on my own to my master's side.

"Lily does look like she wants to dash off even now."

Katou was of the same opinion. I felt a little daunted that I was so easy to understand.

"I can't possibly allow Lily to face the white arachne alone. I would take chase after her immediately. Even if that were to happen, things could be resolved if I simply carried you along with me. I don't distrust you to the level my sister does, and I have no intention of annulling my master's order."

"I suppose so," Katou replied with a nod. "The probability of that

happening was fairly high. If my only goal was to come along, then it might have been better for me to choose a more reasonable means of accomplishing it. Still, doing so won't save Majima-senpai."

She acknowledged everything Rose said, but she hadn't chosen that path. In other words, she knew all this from the very beginning yet still acted as she did.

"If my only goal was to come along, then just as you said, I could have simply asked in a more peaceful manner. I didn't hurt her because I wanted to or anything. However," Katou continued as she shook her head, "that isn't enough. There's no point if we can't save Majima-senpai. Am I wrong?"

"That's true, but..."

I could sense bewilderment in Rose's voice. There was no point if we couldn't save our master. That was completely true. Katou was entirely correct. But how did that connect to her aggressive attitude from earlier? Rose couldn't tell, and neither could I. We both stood there in confusion as Katou put her hand to her chest.

"You both know I have no strength in a fight. I'm incapable of saving Majima-senpai."

Katou Mana was just a human. There was no way she would conveniently awaken to a cheat, so this powerless girl wouldn't be of any use in saving our master.

"But that also applies to you two, doesn't it? The white arachne who abducted Majima-senpai is one of those high monsters you talked about before, right? You mustn't fight it. Just being able to run away depends on luck. A horror that you could never defeat. Isn't that what you said? So, how are you going to save Majima-senpai from that kind of enemy by charging in from the front without a plan?"

"That's..."

"It's fine to be prepared for an honorable death, but if you don't complete your objective in doing so, it will be nothing more than dying in vain. Right?"

I was unable to refute Katou's claim. No matter how enthusiastic we were, we couldn't recover our master without the strength to accomplish it. Such harsh realities existed in this world, where things couldn't be achieved by feelings alone.

"You two are unable to save Majima-senpai. That makes you the same as me, even though I can't even fight, doesn't it?"

If, for example, I had charged off at the white arachne in a rage, we would've surely been trampled down without accomplishing anything. As such, we would've literally died in vain, without saving our master.

Katou already pointed out our complete powerlessness, yet she still pushed things further. "However, there are differences between

you and I. You two are capable of fighting. Even if you have no way of winning, you're still capable of it. As such, depending on how you approach it, you might be able to save Majima-senpai... But that only applies if you don't charge in blindly on a suicide attack."

This was also a painful truth to have pointed out to us. We were in fact trying to challenge the white arachne, who we knew possessed tremendous power far beyond us, without a plan—and directly from the front.

Now that I thought about it calmly, that really was out of the question. It was obvious we should've contrived a way to at least save our master. And even if that was impossible, we should've put all our effort into making it just a little more possible.

The fact that we didn't do so... could only be described as a massive oversight on our part. I hadn't been calm. Blood had gone to my head. I was practically in a panic. And seeing me like that, Katou was at a loss as to what should be done.

Was it better to admonish me so I would regain my cool? No. There was little hope of that succeeding. Rose had already been trying to calm me down. Katou wouldn't have brought about any major change doing the same. I was just a few minutes from charging off on my own to begin with. She didn't have the time needed to convince me.

In a sense, we were like the mother from that old tale in a panic over her child falling into a river. She couldn't even swim, yet she was about to plunge into the raging river. She couldn't be talked to, let alone convinced. If one didn't act swiftly, she was liable to jump in at any moment. But jumping in with her would only add to the corpse count. As such, there was no other choice but to strike her in the back of the head.

Perhaps Rose also realized this potential danger. However, she couldn't think of the option of "striking me in the back of the head." There was no helping it. She was dense to the delicacies of human-like emotion. She couldn't understand how I had gotten like that, and she didn't have any idea how to solve it.

On the other hand, as nothing more than a normal human, Katou didn't possess the physical strength to strike us. As such, she could only stir me up with her words and crush me by poking at my weakness.

From that perspective, I could both understand and agree with her choice... Although, as the one who had been smashed down by her words, it left me feeling somewhat depressed.

"Nothing will change if I only come along. I thought that if I didn't manage to get you two to regain your composure, then it would be absolutely impossible to save Majima-senpai. I had to do it. Even if,

as a result, the two of you were offended and left me behind, I couldn't yield on that point."

From a perfectly rational standpoint, completely disregarding emotion, Katou's decision maybe wasn't the best. But was there actually a better way of doing so? In truth, she managed to get me to regain my composure. There may have been another way, but it was too harsh to ask someone to decide on the best approach in such a short time. On the contrary, Katou deserved praise for her wisdom, for reading that far ahead and immediately deciding on the "strike to the head."

Thanks to her, we were able to recover ourselves enough to give this matter serious thought. The most important thing we had to accomplish here was saving our master. If we were unable to do so, there was no meaning whatsoever in throwing away our lives. A reckless suicide attack was completely out of the question.

It's exactly as she put it... Huh? But... Isn't that a little weird?

"Hey, Katou. It's true from our perspective that being unable to save our master would make it meaningless, but..." Before I knew it, I had completely forgotten I was leaving everything to Rose and cut in on their conversation. "Why are you so worried about our master when you're just a human?"

She had been speaking this entire time on the premise that there was no point unless we saved our master. I had no objection to this as a servant, but that only applied to us. Katou was a human. And yet, she was speaking along our line of reasoning.

She may have simply worded it that way without meaning to, but she went as far as intentionally aggravating Rose's impression of her just to stop my rampage. I could declare pretty definitively this wasn't the case. In other words, she wished to save our master as much as we did. Not only that, she did so without caring what happened to herself.

Thinking back on it now, there were other points which agreed with this. For example, the reason Katou, who had been nothing more than an empty husk, managed to regain her footing during such a crisis could perhaps be explained by this too.

She was worried about our master's safety after he was abducted by the white arachne. She wanted to save him. However, seeing us about to charge in without a plan, she could see we wouldn't be able to succeed.

She couldn't just stand by and watch. If that was what revived her spirit, then the timing with which she did so made sense. However, if that was in fact the case, then that in itself gave birth to another doubt.

My suspicions were well-founded, to me, at least. If my master

were here, he would surely have the same thoughts regarding this. But that didn't seem to be the case for Katou.

"Why am I so worried, you ask?" Katou's tone was sharp. It was like every word from her mouth was dripping with venom. "Am I not allowed to be worried about Majima-senpai's safety?"

It was the deadly poison known as anger.

"Urgh..." I faltered at having such a muddy emotion directed at me.

Katou had never shown such clear animosity before. Even when she utterly crushed me earlier, she didn't flare up in a fit of rage. Her hostility up until now was transparent, so to speak. At most, she was just trying to accomplish her goal... She simply took action to save our master. However, this was different.

"Am I not allowed to if I'm not a servant?"

For just an instant, she pointed her anger toward me at full force. Her rage was silent. She didn't raise her voice at all. But I could clearly see her deep anguish and sorrow through the trembling in her voice. It was likely I had said something extremely careless which touched on something deep within her heart. As such, she had gotten angry enough to lose herself, despite being a rational person.

"I... I..." I tried opening my mouth multiple times but ended up closing it and biting on my lip.

"...Sorry. I lost my composure," Katou said as she closed her eyes. The anger in her voice had already vanished completely. In that tiny amount of time, she managed to regain her self-control.

I bowed back to her. "...I should be the one saying sorry. Looks like I said something careless."

Judging from her state, she was seriously worried about our master. I didn't understand the reason for her harboring such feelings, but I didn't have the courage to ask her. I didn't want to anger Katou by messing around with her to begin with, and I didn't think myself ill-natured enough to crudely touch on topics others didn't want to speak of just to satiate my curiosity.

"Do you mind if we get back to the topic on hand?"

As expected, it was Rose who broke the delicate atmosphere we had built around us. She was always calm. There was basically nothing out there that could throw her off unless it involved our master. Katou pulled herself together and lightly lowered her head to Rose.

"I understand that you were trying to cool our heads, Katou. It was a fairly reckless way of doing so, but I understand the validity of your choice."

"Thank you."

"I should be the one thanking you. Because of you, we didn't

throw ourselves into a reckless suicide attack. However..."

"Yes, all this has done is bring us to the starting line."

Rose nodded gravely. "You're right. There's no meaning if we can't think of a proposal to realistically save our master. Unfortunately, I'm unable to think of an effective plan to do so. As for Lily..." Rose threw me a look.

I shook my head. "I can't think of anything either."

She then turned back to Katou. "You said you wanted to come along with us to save our master. Can something be done about this pressing situation by bringing you along?"

"No, even I understand this isn't such a simple problem. I know full well what I'm capable of. Actually, I'm pretty much incapable of doing anything. I'm nothing more than a girl who couldn't even save the life of her best friend. I know I won't be able to do anything in this situation."

Katou paused and looked gloomily over to Rose. "Just to ask, is there any possibility of you two defeating that spider in a head-on confrontation?"

"...Probably not. We would get killed in 100 of 100 fights, or even 1000 of 1000. That's just how large the gap is between us," Rose said as she coldly estimated our odds.

"Even if either of you... or both of you plan to die to begin with?"

"I think it would still be impossible. The most we could hope for would be inflicting a wound."

"...I'm surprised you wanted to charge in given those odds, Lily."

"B-Blood was rushing to my head..."

Katou looked at me in astonishment, but she immediately changed gears. "So, what if your only goal is to save Majima-senpai?"

"I think that would still be impossible." Even with the hurdle lowered, Rose still denied the possibility. "The gap between our abilities is just far too large."

"Is it to the point where you can't do anything at all?"

"Let's see... If we were to stake our lives, focus only on recovering our master, and some miracle occurred... We may be able to temporarily steal a march on the arachne. It wouldn't change the fact that we would all die in the end, though."

There would be no meaning to that. I was of the same opinion.

"Is that so? Thank you. I have a grasp of the situation... It really is the worst, huh?"

Exactly. The situation we found ourselves in was harsh. It was to the point where just continuing to talk about it deepened our despair. Presently, we had no means of fighting the white arachne and taking back our master.

There was no room for argument; charging in without thinking of

anything was the dumbest thing we could do. Although, racking our brains over it didn't mean we could come up with a good plan either.

"For now, there's at least one thing I can say," Katou continued as we all bit down on the bitterness of the situation we found ourselves in. "At this rate, you two won't be able to save Majima-senpai from that spider just by going there."

"Yes. It seems so," Rose replied.

"As such, shouldn't you borrow all the help you can get? Even if it's just a cat's paw. I might be able to be of some use."

"Our situation cannot deteriorate seeing that we're already unable to save our master. So you mean taking you along can't make it any worse and might make things change for the better?"

"Yes. Moreover, there's something else I can do other than being a human shield or bait." Katou put her hand to her chest. "I can put together a plan to recover Majima-senpai together with you. We may be able to think up a plan with three minds that two could not. At the very least, I believe we can think of something better than an honorable defeat with pretty much no prospect for success, don't you?"

Katou was being modest, but seeing how she had utterly crushed me earlier using only her words, it was actually quite reassuring to have her as the brains here.

Of course, whether I could trust her or not was a different matter. I didn't trust her the same way I trusted Rose, and even now, I felt like I wanted to remove all possible uncertainties. It was true Katou said she wanted to save our master and stopped us from making a reckless suicide attack, but I still doubted the credibility of her statement. I could go on forever about everything I found suspicious about her. I was distrustful by nature, after all.

However, none of that held any meaning right now. It wasn't a problem of whether or not I could trust her. We were unable to recover our master as things were. And Rose and I were unable to come up with a plan to overturn the situation.

Just as Katou pointed out, we had reached our limit. As such, we had no choice but to bet on something we didn't consider. We had to rely on her. Before we knew it, the problem was no longer about whether or not we could trust her but whether we would accept her assistance. All that was left was for Rose to make her decision, but...

"You two actually do get it, don't you?" Katou spoke up so that we were doubly sure of the situation. "You're both at a stalemate without me. That's why you're spending what precious time you have here to make certain what sort of person I am, right? So this isn't the time to be grumbling about something trivial."

Katou's lips curved into the slightest of smiles. "Please allow me to

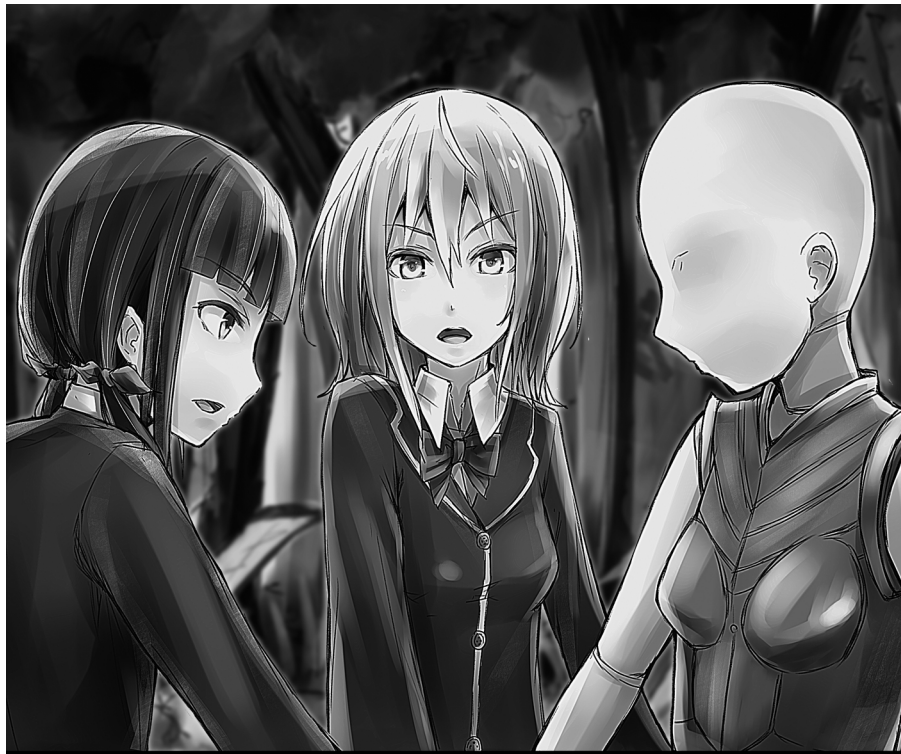
help save Majima-senpai. I'll definitely prove myself useful."

She held out the hand she'd been holding to her chest. Rose pointed her featureless face toward it. I clearly understood what was going through my cute little sister's head. I didn't even need the mental path. I shared the exact same feelings as her, after all.

"Sister."

"I know."

I had no choice but to accept it. The human girl who possessed no power at all had handily defeated two monsters and left us at our wits' end. However, it was quite the turn of good fortune that we lost here.





We spent the next ten minutes having a strategy meeting, and then we gave chase after the arachne. About 20 minutes had passed since my master was abducted. The fact that we managed to draft up a plan in such a short amount of time despite the difficulties we faced was largely due to Katou.

We servants had a mental connection with our master. It wasn't so trivial a thing that it could be severed by distance. There was no problem in taking chase. We moved through the forest at full speed. As a normal human, Katou was unable to keep up with us, so Rose was carrying her.

It was actually quite dangerous. I could detect enemies by scent using the senses of a firefang, but it wasn't absolute. We could only move around the pace of a trot because of all the obstacles in the forest, but we were still being fairly negligent of our surroundings. Even worse, Rose's hands were completely occupied.

Normally, we would avoid this at all costs, but we didn't have the leisure to complain about it now. We could only pray to the heavens that we didn't encounter any monsters until reaching our destination. Rather, if we didn't grasp such good fortune here as if it were perfectly natural, then we wouldn't have the luck needed to win the reckless fight to come.

At any rate, we were planning on challenging the white arachne. In the end, we couldn't come up with any sort of convenient plan to defeat her. There was a limit to what amateurs like us could think of no matter how many of us you put together.

And yet, we still dared to challenge her.

It wasn't like we had zero prospects for victory. We had a plan. It was basically a gamble, but it possibly could succeed.

"Are you prepared to survive no matter what happens?"

That's what the planner, Katou, had told us. And if it was for our master's sake, then our answer was obvious.

Thus, we fervently dashed through the dark nighttime forest to take grasp of that tiny thread which connected to victory.

Chapter 14: The White Spider's Shackles

"My... servant...?"

I was at a complete loss for words at this reality the white arachne had thrust before me. The monster who attacked us this evening—who kidnapped me, who kicked Rose aside, who easily evaded Lily after she took chase—was my servant.

"No way, that's..."

I doubted my own senses, but my instincts couldn't deny this monster was my servant. I then began doubting my mind, but this also didn't seem to be a delusion born of despair.

"Why would... a servant attack their own master?"

All of my servants yearned for me, and I believed that I reciprocated such feelings. There was certainly a bond of trust and love between us. To an outsider, such a relationship might appear twisted. However, that bond was more precious to us than anything else, so their opinions didn't matter. I loved Lily and Rose. As a master. Or perhaps, like family. That's why I thought I would treat any new servant just as dearly. Unconditionally. Maybe even innocently.

"So why...?"

"How unexpectedly dense of you, My Lord," the white arachne replied in a playful tone. "I already told you. 'There's but one thing I desire,' and 'I have no interest in taking such insignificant lives.' There is no reason beyond that."

"So, you... want me?"

I didn't get it. What value did I possess? But there was a certain credibility to what she was saying. I'd thought it over before. She didn't kill me, and she went out of her way to bring me all the way to her nest. In other words, the white arachne's goal wasn't to take my life but to secure my person. I was somewhat relieved I wouldn't be killed right away, but...

The white spider laughed. "It seems you fail to understand just how valuable you are, My Lord. Teeheehee."

Her expression reminded me of something.

She's like an innocent child watching a bug in a cage.

The roles of insect and human were reversed, but this scene was similar. An unpleasant bead of sweat ran down my cheek.

I won't be killed at least? That's a relief...?

I was an idiot. Spending the rest of my days in the dark future, captured in this spider's web, was no salvation. I had to get away from here one way or another. But how?

The most realistic approach was to wait for Lily and Rose to save me. But that was also unrealistic. The two of them were likely to... no, they were definitely going to come and try and save me. But the outcome of that was sure to be extremely cruel. The white arachne was completely beyond them.

Just thinking of my companions' lives being miserably scattered to the winds drained the blood from my face. I couldn't let that happen. I couldn't rely on them here. I had to escape before they got here.

It would all be over if I didn't. Anything and everything. But how could I possibly escape from this spider's web? I desperately racked my brain for an answer, but nothing good came to mind.

The arachne watched me panic and put her eight legs into action as she drew closer. She then smiled broadly like a bewitching beauty.

"It seems you require some education regarding the value you possess, My Lord."

She slightly inclined her head, her silky white hair slipping over her shoulder. She leaned forward in excitement, causing her practically see-through chiffon-like garment to press down on her soft breasts.

The word temptress came to mind. I couldn't help but feel a strong sense of obscenity from each and every one of her actions. It sent shivers down my spine. Such a bewitching and beautiful girl atop a repulsive spider would normally make me want to avert my gaze. And yet, in her case, even with such a cruel reality before me, her beauty and charm felt far more prominent.

Even as I grew dizzy from the oddity of the situation and her coquettish behavior, I did my best to maintain my consciousness in a normal state. I was certain I would be overwhelmed the moment I relaxed my focus.

"Education?"

I couldn't afford to offend her, for now. My only option was to buy time and search for an opening... Not that I knew an opening would appear; I could only wait and see.

With a cold sweat running down my spine, I continued to question the monster before me.

"And what exactly are you going to teach me?"

"Let's see... First, shall we begin with a little lesson about the beings you call monsters?" the arachne replied. She was in an extremely good mood, a complete contrast to mine. "Do you properly understand what they are, My Lord?"

“They’re... beings who possess mana, right?” I carefully scrutinized the meaning behind her question as I answered. “Monsters are capable of drawing forth strange power precisely because they possess mana. How a firefang can spit flames, how a magical puppet can move a wooden body, how a slime can maintain a viscous state, how a treant can move like a creature despite being a tree... All of this is because of the mana monsters possess.”

“Exactly. So, do you know anything about how mana enters a monster’s body?”

“I think it was... by accumulating the mana in the earth into their bodies, or something like that.” Lily had told me about this before. I recalled the example of heavy metals, but that wouldn’t get through to the arachne, so I didn’t use it.

She looked slightly bored with my answer. “You’re quite well-informed... Oh, yes, you had that little wood chip with you, didn’t you? Did you hear this from her?”

She was likely referring to Rose. Now that I thought of it, was she really alright? It looked like she took a pretty bad hit, so I was worried.

“Whatever, it matters not. So, My Lord, did you know that we monsters do not possess what you would call a will?”

“I heard a bit about that before...”

Lily had told me about it in bed once. Before becoming my servant, she didn’t have a definite will. All she did was wander around the forest aimlessly.

“From what my companions told me, they obtained an ego for the first time when they became my servants.”

“Oooh. Oooh! So it’s true!”

She raised her voice in joy and excitement. Her legs stamped about, causing the floor to creak as if it were about to break. The pillars tied together by spider webs and even the ceiling began creaking boisterously. It was as if the entire space around us was celebrating in joy with the white spider.

“So, do you understand? Do you? Do you know what your true value is now?!”

I had been captured by this spider. I felt it in my bones, and I lightly bit down on my lip because of it.

“My value...? I don’t have any...”

“You do. It seems you are unaware of it, though.” Her wild enthusiasm came to a stop, but she was still excited. Her smooth white cheeks were tinged a sensual red. “Do you not understand? Even that lack of understanding is ever so adorable.”

She bent her legs and drew closer. She was already close enough to press her skin against mine. The white hairs from her legs touched

my arm. They felt unexpectedly silky. She stretched out her arm and began stroking my shoulder.

I heard the sound of cloth tearing. She was removing the leftover fragments of my shirt. She touched my body with her slender finger and gently ran it across my skin. She looked up at me with her red eyes. I got goosebumps from the pleasant sensation this gave me.

"This is a bit of a contradiction from what I just told you, but I actually had something like a will before becoming your servant."

"...What?" I knit my brows. This was different from what I'd heard.

"Having said that, it was ever so faint. From your perspective, I'm sure it was but a fleeting thing you couldn't even call an ego," she said in a self-deprecating manner. Although, in complete contrast to her words, the girl atop the white spider took an ecstatic breath. It was proof of how much of a good mood she was in.

This was supposed to be a good thing for me. As she twirled her finger around my chest, she could easily pluck out my heart by poking me on a single whim. My entire life was directly connected to her mood. And yet I couldn't honestly be happy about her good mood. On the contrary, it gave me a slight chill. The happier she was, the more I felt like I was sinking into darkness.

"After many, many, many years, I established my own ego. However, it was but a faint and fleeting thing. You see, I lived in a deep slumber for a long, looong time. And tonight, I opened my eyes for the very first time. Though, you may not be able to understand how much excitement this brought me."

"...So, I was the trigger which woke you up?"

To be precise, it was my cheat. My ability to tame monsters was capable of mass-producing servants. That in no way meant it was a power which made them my puppets or tools for combat, though.

The monsters who became my servants, Lily and Rose, possessed firm egos. They also gave their hearts to me with strong emotions, one in the form of love and the other in the form of loyalty.

Ego and emotions.

This white spider had probably desired these things to no end for a long, long period of time.

"My circumstances aren't that much different from those little ones who serve you, My Lord. Even if it was not to the same extent, they possessed a faint ego. Or perhaps they were special monsters who possessed the seedling for an ego to sprout from."

"Special monsters..."

Thinking back on it now, it was in fact true that Lily was a unique monster and Rose was a rare specimen. When I'd learned this, I faintly thought that maybe this was a condition for becoming my servant. I

didn't have enough samples to make a proper conclusion, though.

The white arachne before me was a high monster, making her quite special. You could say that the amount of mana these monsters could retain was what made them special. This white arachne in particular pointed out that she'd had the most fertile grounds for an ego to grow from. As such, it was possible this excess of mana had an influence on the development of an ego in monsters.

It felt like an erratic idea even from my perspective, but after thinking about it, it didn't seem that far off. For example, if it didn't possess mana, a monster like a magical puppet was nothing more than a wooden doll. The same applied to the undead, who were nothing more than corpses. Even if they didn't possess a clear will like humans did, they at least had what meager intelligence they needed to attack other creatures on sight. It didn't look like there was some invisible hand manipulating them. They all looked like they were acting autonomously to me.

It was possible that mana, which I had no familiarity with since it was particular to this world, essentially had such a nature to it. In which case, the beings we students called monsters were actually closer to the yokai of Japan. The monster fox or old tools which gained wills over the long course of years were much like the monsters who accumulated mana over the long passage of time.

The fact that Lily, Rose, and the white arachne were all females could also be explained by this. If monsters gained egos by accumulating mana, it meant all my servants possessed a certain level of mana. And the monsters who could accumulate the most mana were the ones capable of giving birth to other specimens—in other words, females.

"We are all connected to you, are we not?"

The arachne gradually ran her finger down my body. I tried to stop her from doing so but couldn't. Before I knew it, my uninjured arm had been fastened to the floor with webbing.

"...You mean the mental path?"

"Yes. That is the true nature of your power."

I didn't know whether she noticed my futile resistance, but she smiled with her face close enough to feel her breath. A clink resounded through the air as my broken belt buckle fell to the ground, and the arachne licked her red lips. She then stretched her hand out to my chest once more.

"We're able to touch your heart through this mental path. By doing so, we learn how a heart should be. Be that as it may, without the soil to nurture a heart, one cannot unravel what exactly this means. This is the definitive difference between those who are and are not able to become your servants, My Lord."

My heart was connected to the hearts of my servants. I didn't interpret it as anything more than a convenient power up until now. However, the arachne pointed out that this was actually the source of my power. For example, back in the cave, I connected with Lily through the mental path, and she was touched by my wish. In a sense, she touched upon my heart. That was the trigger which formed her individuality.

The servants I gave birth to like this were obviously different from the traditional image of a tamed monster. They weren't being domesticated. They simply treated me, the one who gave them an ego, with the same yearning a child showed for their parents and wanted to help me out of goodwill.

With my ability structured this way, I had no actual power to bind those girls to me as servants. I was learning these details in the worst way possible.

"Heeheehee."

The spider laughed and looked at me like she found me dear from the bottom of her heart—or perhaps, like she was affectionately watching a creature in a cage.

"I'm certain you're incapable of understanding how much of a shock I received upon discovering you, My Lord," she said as she threw her arms wide open. "The world grew so vivid! I felt that I definitely existed!"

I could sense an attachment to me in her voice, as if stuck down by heavy spider webs. From that, I felt for the very first time, despite it being quite twisted compared to Lily or Rose, that this white arachne held abnormal feelings toward my very existence. She was my servant.

"I possess power. Power that won't lose to anyone. And with it, I shall achieve whatever my heart desires! Just as the ego I attained wills it!"

My servants were somewhat childish in a sense, like a portion of them had a pure simplicity to them. Perhaps it was inevitable, considering it hadn't been that long since they attained egos. However, this white arachne had a long-cherished desire accumulating and accumulating over the passage of time. And that desire was being overwhelmed by her instincts as a spider to take everything she wanted, tie it up, and monopolize it. That's what led her to this violent act.

"Do you understand me now, My Lord?"

"U-Ugh...?!"

The hand that had been caressing my body tightened around my throat with the same graceful movements as before.

"Do you understand just how valuable you are to me?"

Her seductive exhalation was sweet. She gazed at me in a trance, cheeks red, as I lay there suffering.

“You were the one to bestow myself unto me. Thus, I cannot help but adore you.”

My vision began flickering in and out. There wasn't enough oxygen getting to my brain. My consciousness grew hazy.

“I want your everything, My Lord.”

As my consciousness faded, I felt the violent stream of her emotions through our mental path. Her raging torrent of desire bleached my mind. Everything was being painted over white. Everything lost its color.

“Become mine. Let's spend a looong time together.”

I felt an intense loneliness.

My heart felt like it would break.

I couldn't stand it.

I was weak.

My heart was weak.

Even if I was completely alone, I would surely be unable to withstand this white storm.

“...So, they're here,” the white arachne muttered as she loosened her grip on my throat.

Through my hazy vision, I vaguely saw her beautiful face scowl. And as doubts floated through my mind, a dignified voice resounded through the nest.

“Is that the reason you abducted our master?”

My heart had felt like it would be crushed by the overwhelming torrent of desire from the white spider, but now a gentle warmth began flowing in.

Chapter 15: Mortal Combat

Lily, spear in hand, stared at the arachne with a stern expression. Rose stood at the ready right behind her, her axe prepared at her hip. With the arachne's fingers still around my throat, I remained there staring at their shadows.

They came for me.

It wasn't that I didn't think they would come. On the contrary, I was convinced they would take chase. But actually witnessing their dedication right before me as they braved danger sent a burning warmth through my chest. That simple sight was enough for my heart to recover. As I thought before, I was hopeless without them.

A charming voice tickled my earlobe. "Hmm. So you chased me here. I see. This is what they call a reckless disregard for your own life." Her fingers let go of my neck, and the white arachne turned to face Lily and Rose.

"Hak... gak..." I fell back and broke into a coughing fit. A single tear spilled from my eye. That brought me back to reality.

"You'll die if you fight me."

This wasn't the time to be celebrating. My captor was the white arachne. She was an incarnation of tyranny. Saving me meant standing against that horror. In other words, they were leaping into the jaws of death.

Aah, dammit. Why couldn't I prevent this from happening?

I knew full well it would happen, yet I could do nothing about it. My body trembled with regret. Lily was sure to have lost her composure when I was kidnapped. I didn't know how much Rose had managed to calm her down, but there was a pretty high likelihood the two of them would charge in here recklessly.

They were challenging an opponent they couldn't defeat. Fortunately, it seemed my safety was guaranteed—setting aside how dubious that was coming from this spider. They could have spent several days forming a plan and perfecting their preparations before challenging her. That possibly could have taken too long, but it was infinitely better than taking decisive action to attempt a rescue mission that was destined to fail.

As it was, I knew these girls were incapable of thinking this way. I knew it would end up like this, yet I didn't prepare anything in advance. This was my mistake. I should've planned for this

beforehand. There was no way anybody out there would cover for my mistakes.

“How pitiful it is to rush to your deaths.” The arachne moved behind me and faced Lily. “I can at least understand the obsession you worthless specks have for My Lord,” she said as she squinted her red eyes. “I can understand, but unfortunately for you, I won’t hand him over. He is mine. You shan’t steal him, and I shan’t lose him. I possess the power to make it so, after all.” Her spiderweb-like fixation spilled from her red lips. “Begone, you boring pests.”

“You’re the boring one.”

I was faced with hopeless despair, yet I saw something completely unexpected. Even as she stood before a mass of bloodlust that could freeze one’s veins, Lily remained dignified. She didn’t give the impression she was facing off against a horror far beyond her means.

Seeing her like that, I suddenly realized my own misunderstanding. Lily hadn’t lost her cool. I felt her anger through our mental path, but she was suppressing it and was far calmer than I expected. It showed that she didn’t charge in here completely influenced by her emotions. I could tell that she came here after having hardened her resolve. So, just maybe, she properly thought things over before deciding to come here.

Did she have a chance?

But how?

I believed in these girls more than anybody else. However, that had nothing to do with the situation we were in. My sense of reason was telling me they were going to be torn to shreds.

“...I’m boring? How admirable of you, little girl.”

The white arachne’s bloodlust flared up, supporting my ominous conviction. Even though I couldn’t sense mana, I could feel how much of an extraordinary threat she was. The thick air coiled itself around my body. Despite being in a nest with no walls, it was difficult to breathe through this oppression.

This wasn’t going to work after all. The girls I found more dear than anything else were about to be mercilessly killed in front of my eyes. And now that I was convinced of this, I had to say something, even if I knew it would be useless.

“Stop! Leave me! Run away! Please! Just run!”

“I shan’t allow it.” The arachne’s voice was filled with a fervor. She couldn’t overlook Lily and Rose. “You’ve claimed that my dearest wish is boring. I must put that bravery of yours to the test...” Her enormous body sank to the floor. “...I shall devour you piece by piece!”

She unleashed her strength like a wound-up spring. There was no stopping her anymore. No matter what I did, this was going to unfold.

And just before the slaughter began...

“It’s okay, Master.”

Watching me tremble at the premonition of losing everything, Lily smiled like a blooming flower.



The spider leapt through the air. Just that sent the nest shaking like a ship in a storm.

“Shaaaah!”

Jumping in the air using six legs was practically like being shot out of a cannon. The ten meters between the white arachne and Lily shrunk to zero within milliseconds. Before such jumping power, a wait-and-see approach would never succeed. Much like how Rose had been struck down by a single blow before, for example.

That’s why Lily had decided on what to do before the battle even began.

“Haah!”

Rose unleashed a shriek and swung her battleaxe from behind Lily. At the same time, Lily vigorously threw herself to the ground without worrying about what was in front or behind her. As a result, the space that Lily occupied just an instant earlier now had a wooden axe cutting through it.

“What?!”

The white arachne was targeting Lily. She was surely planning to stab the brazen little girl with a single strike. But Lily had read the arachne’s move and thrown herself to the ground. When one’s target suddenly vanished, it gave birth to a moment’s hesitation, if just for an instant. This was especially the case when jumping in at full force. Even a horror would have trouble coping with the immediate situation.

The spider’s strike only managed to cut off some of Lily’s flaxen hair. But that wasn’t all. The arachne’s body was now flying toward Rose’s brandished axe. There was no mistaking that Lily provoked her to create this exact situation.

And so they clashed.

Despite being made of wood, Rose’s battleaxe was strengthened with mana. Its hardness surpassed steel. When swung with the physical strength of a monster, the amount of destructive force behind it was nothing to scoff at.

Rose’s axe dove into the arachne’s lower body with a thunk—somewhere a little to the right of the spider’s cephalothorax. The simple yet well-made blade tore through her tightly packed white hairs and even managed to smash past her thick husk, sinking into her muscle and causing a small amount of blood to spray out. However,

the axe was unable to withstand the force and burst before it could sink to a decisive depth.

“Gyah?!”

Rose had lost in terms of speed, toughness, and, above all else, the weight of her strikes. The enormous white body of the arachne charged past her like a blur. She managed to get out of the way as the spider grazed by, but it proved the difference between them. Rose’s body span like a top and blew away. Her axe-wielding arm wasn’t just broken, it flew off entirely. Her body slammed into the makeshift ground of the nest and bounced off.

The arachne landed with all eight legs and then leaped up to finish off Rose in mid-air.

A scream rang out. “I won’t let you!”

Lily was on all fours, but she invoked the magic she already had at the ready. It was grade 3 wind magic composed of 37 blades. Its power wasn’t all that high, but it could cut up a wide area. This was one of her specialties.

The raging wind blew like a storm. Several of the lights dangling by spider threads were blown away, and the thin flooring clattered as they whirled up into the air. Even a high monster wouldn’t be able to get away unscathed. That was my opinion while watching from a small distance away.

Just as I felt satisfaction over that...

“This is nothing!”

The white arachne escaped the effective range of Lily’s magic with impossible movements. Right before the magic activated, she stopped her charge and shot out a spider thread at one of the surrounding trees. Everything was a reapplication of what she’d done with me and the firefang last time.

She pulled on the thread with superhuman strength, which uprooted the tree, and glided through the air. Her enormous body vanished from my vision entirely.

Lily didn’t lose sight of her though and let out another cry. “There!”

“You fool!”

I heard a loud snap. By the time I turned my head to look at it, the arachne had already thrust out one of her legs. Lily had taken aim at her with her spear while she was still in midair, but said spear was now snapped in two and flying all the way up to the ceiling.

“G-Guh...” Lily groaned as both of her arms were partially torn apart and bent back the wrong way. She was now completely defenseless.

The white arachne wasn’t going to let that opportunity pass. She landed and stabbed her hand at Lily’s face. Lily couldn’t get away

from it. Imagining what was to follow, I was on the verge of screaming.

“Not... yet!”

In the next instant, Rose charged in at the arachne’s flank.

“Wha—?!”

Lily’s wind magic had sent most of the nest’s woodwork flying into the air. Rose, who was supposed to have been defeated already, managed to slip into the arachne’s blind spot by using the wreckage as cover. As sisters who shared a tight bond as my servants, their wave of attacks managed to create an opening.

“Haah!”

Rose had lost an arm from the previous exchange, so she now had her spare axe in her other hand, which she used to strike at the white arachne’s open flank.

“U-Urgh?!”

However, this attack wasn’t enough to deal a fatal wound. Rose then aimed the axe for a critical hit on the arachne’s graceful neck, but she used one of her legs as a shield and blocked the strike. As a result, that leg was severed and flew into the air.

That was still far and away from a fatal blow. Nevertheless, a wound was still a wound. In fact, getting injured by a clearly lower-ranking opponent perhaps dealt a deep blow to the white arachne’s pride.

“Ugh... You measly servant!” The arachne’s face twisted with hatred. A white leg thrust out like a spear.

“Gyah?!”

Having just swung her axe, Rose was unable to get out of the way. She took a direct hit. Her body flew off and smashed through two of the trees serving as the nest’s pillars before coming to a stop. The ceiling which was being supported by those trees began creaking and tilting over. This time, Rose was no longer moving.

Lily had lost both her arms. Rose had lost one arm and was down for the count. The fight was basically decided at this point. At least, that was what the arachne thought.

That was precisely the only opportunity for victory the girls had. Lily’s eyes glittered as she hung her head in pain. She looked up at the arachne at point-blank range and snapped open her mouth.

“Graaah!”

A red flame poured out of her throat. It was the flaming breath of a firefang she’d gained from mimicking one. It was a complete surprise attack. Even the arachne couldn’t avoid it. The flames directly struck her in the face.

“Uaaargh?!”

“They did it... Huh?”

I was hopeful, but in the next instant, my spine froze over. I witnessed white threads wrapping around Lily's body. They tied her from her shoulder down to her chest, including her left arm, and her right side down to her legs. The sticky threads scorched my vision with white.

"What... do..." The white arachne muttered in a deep voice, her body bent backwards. "What do you think you've accomplished?! You insignificant pest!"

One of the threads was connected to one of the spider's legs. She held the other in her hand. The arachne let out an angry roar and used a high monster's strength to pull on the threads with all her might.

Even a small child could understand what would happen next. For example, say you took a plastic doll, like those targeted at little girls, and held its leg with one hand while pulling on its arm with all your strength with the other.

In the same way, Lily's blazer and shirt tore apart with a rip along with the left side of her body.

"Ah."

She let out a quiet murmur and collapsed like a marionette with no strings. She stopped moving entirely. An ominous silence sank over the area.

"That one... really gave me a chill."

Lily's feelings coming through our mental path were extremely faint. The white arachne was a servant just like her. The two of them were also connected through me. She must've also felt this from Lily because she made a ghostly smile.

"I never thought I'd be wounded so badly. However, now it's all over."

There was a slight blister on the arachne's face. But that was all. The gap between them was just that far apart.

"Heh, heheh, heheheheheh."

The bewitching girl's laughter was like that of a devil. It was exactly as she said. This was a perfectly reasonable outcome. The obvious result occurred naturally. With the cruel reality of the world thrust right before me, I could do nothing but stand by and watch.

"Now that I think about it, you two truly are pitiful. However, do not resent me. Resent your own powerlessness. If only you had power, you would have been able to avoid death." Her tone clearly ridiculed them, as if pity was completely unnecessary.

"Farewell." The arachne raised her leg directly over Lily's head. There was nobody here capable of stopping her.

In just one more second, that talon would tear into Lily's body. I would lose that precious girl forever. There wasn't anybody here who could prevent that future. There wasn't supposed to be.

“That’s quite the sad misunderstanding you’re making.”

I doubted my own ears—

“K-Katou...?”

I didn’t believe what I was seeing. The one to step within the spider’s nest was, without a doubt, none other than Katou Mana.

That she was here wasn’t all that strange. If I had to guess, Lily and Rose brought her along and she was hiding outside the nest. But why did she show herself now? This was a battlefield. It wasn’t a place for a powerless girl like her.

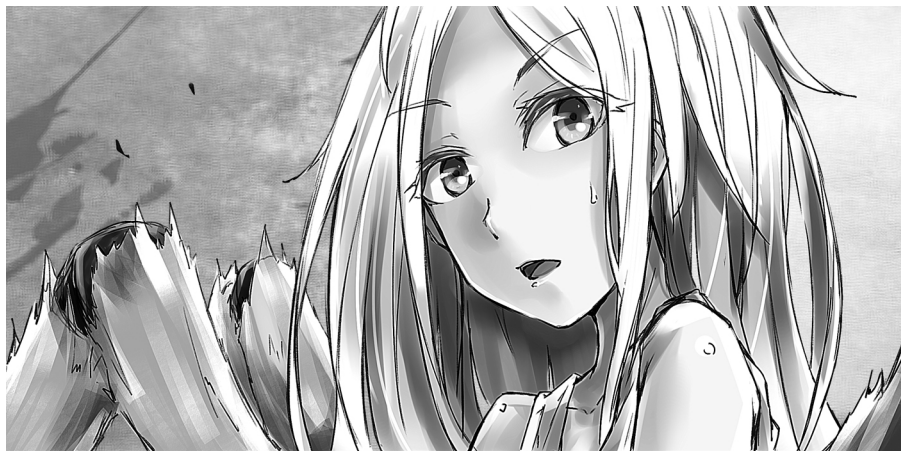
“And who in blazes are you?” The white arachne gazed at Katou with a dubious look. “A misunderstanding, you say? What are you talking about?”

A slight sense of discomfort, a great bewilderment, and a hint of curiosity—a hectic swirl of emotions ran through the white arachne’s blood red eyes. “Why would a mere human like you stand before me? Do you wish to commit suicide, little girl?”

It was only normal for the white arachne to say this. She could kill Katou at any moment, and she surely wouldn’t hesitate to do so. The arachne’s claim made perfect sense. This was the same as committing suicide. Yet Katou didn’t look like she cared at all. She just shook her head.

“It’s not suicide to come out like this when I’m already going to die. The reason I stepped out here is... Let’s see... Because there’s one thing I’d like to complain about.” Her attitude as she stood in front of the white horror implied that if the arachne wished to kill her, then she could go ahead and do so. “There’s a lot I want to say to you servants. Thinking back on it, Lily was the same. Why be jealous of someone like me? Even if the lawn is greener on the other side, don’t you think it’s far too cruel? *I’m* the one who’s jealous.”

Though she was rather expressionless, her gloomy gaze glared at the white arachne as she spoke with resentment.



“Aren’t you the same? You have something I could never obtain within your reach, and yet you don’t even realize it. Isn’t it obvious that I’d like to at least complain about it?”

I couldn’t understand her meaning. Neither could the white arachne. She remained silent for several seconds with a crease in her brow. In the end, she couldn’t figure it out and slowly shook her head.

“That’s enough nonsense from you, little girl.” She swung her arm to the side. A thread shot out at a speed imperceptible by humans and wrapped around Katou’s neck. “You’re just prattling on meaninglessly. It seems you do not understand the situation here.”

Her life could now be plucked away with a small flick of the arachne’s wrist. Katou had no choice but to hold her tongue... Or so I thought. She completely betrayed my expectations.

“Oh, and one more thing. I have a goal, you see.” Katou didn’t yield to the fear of death. “Rose told me, ‘even if we stake our lives, we’ll need a miracle.’ Regardless, a miracle doesn’t occur all that easily. Reality is always cruel. But I don’t want to yield to such cruelty. I never want to go through that again. That’s why I decided to set my bed down alongside the lives of Lily, Rose, and one other.”

“So, what exactly are you...?”

“You don’t get it?” Katou smirked. “I’ve bought plenty of time... Right, Lily?”

By then, the situation was already settled.

“...That was way too dangerous no matter how you put it.” A slimy, transparent hand grasped the arachne’s face like an eagle. “But... Thank you for helping out. It really saved us. After all, our only chance at victory was in the fact that this arachne didn’t know I was a slime.”

“You... worthless...”

The spider’s eyes shot wide open as Lily’s slimy body wrapped around her.

“Didn’t you notice I was playing dead? This is my special move.”

As Lily said, this was the trump card of her mimicry. I had actually seen her play dead before. That’s why I could immediately tell that wasn’t what she did.

“...Just kidding. Ahahah. Maybe I’m bluffing too much. I really was close to dying there. I totally lost consciousness. It would’ve been bad if I didn’t have all that extra time.”

This situation was different from the time with Kaga. About half of Lily’s upper body coming out of her slime portion was in a liquid state, and even her contour was unclear. This wasn’t on purpose. She wasn’t capable of properly maintaining her human body.

Precisely because their bodies were so simple, slimes possessed

tenacious vitality. But it wasn't like they could be torn apart without taking any damage. Lily hadn't been pretending to be dead. She had been seriously on death's door after suffering a major wound.

Nonetheless, she had to do that. She couldn't just pretend; she really had to be on the verge of death after taking a significant blow. That was what gave birth to a small sense of accomplishment within the white arachne and created a large opening.

And now the decisive moment these girls staked their lives on had arrived.

"I won't let you get away," Lily said with the arachne's face in hand. She gathered what little mana she managed to accumulate while she was down and a shining glyph took shape.

"You pest...!"

The captured arachne immediately tried to tear off Lily's arm. And just as her hands moved to grab Lily, an axe came flying in.

"Lily! Now!"

It was Rose. Katou wasn't just buying time for Lily. Rose also used that short amount of time to pull herself back together enough to support her sister. Just throwing an axe wasn't enough to amputate a high monster's arm, but it was enough to throw off her aim. The arachne's hands grabbed nothing but air.

This only bought a single second. But that was enough. Lily's wind magic took the form of a bullet and exploded in the white arachne's face.

"Uaaaargh?!"

The recoil sent Lily flying back against the floor. On the other hand, the arachne's body simply staggered back like a firm rock.

"O-O-Oh..."

Her seven legs stumbled. Blood poured out of her nose. Her upper body swayed. But that was it.

"T-Time... and time... again... You insufferable pests!"

Astonishingly, the white arachne withstood the shot from point-blank magic. Lily didn't have the leisure to gather much mana, so it wasn't an attack with all her power behind it. But even so, it was an attack from point-blank. The fact that the arachne's neck didn't break, and that her face wasn't even crushed, truly showed her abnormal sturdiness.

As a result, all Lily was able to do was stun the arachne for a tiny amount of time. But that tiny opening was enough to accomplish Lily and Rose's goal.

"Lily! Rose!"

"Master!"

The two of them splendidly managed to arrive at my side with their lives intact.

Chapter 16: A Servant's Happiness

"Lily! Rose!"

"Master!"

I caught my two servants as they leaped toward me. Well, to be more precise, they pushed me down. My arm was still stuck to the floor with spider webs, so I couldn't really move. I could only fall backward as they hugged me.

"Master! Masteeer! Thank goodness you're okay...!"

"We were worried, Master."

The two of them buried their faces in my chest and rejoiced at our reunion. I was of course equally as happy. But that wasn't really the problem here.

I screamed out in pain. "O-Ow! Ow! B-Both of you calm down a little!"

"...Oh, right. You're not really okay, huh?" Lily immediately began casting healing magic while Rose used the carving knife she had at her hip to cut me free from the webs.

"Sorry, Master. I was just so happy."

"No, it's fine. Don't worry about it."

The fact that they were so happy was proof of how worried they were. That thought warmed my heart and made me forget about the pain. Having said that, I still needed a few minutes to be able to move again. Lily's healing magic had its limitations, though I couldn't complain. Besides, I wasn't in a situation where I could whine about my own wounds.

Both Lily and Rose were in ghastly shape. After taking major damage, Lily was barely able to keep up her mimicry. Half her face and most of her body had returned to a slime state. I could see her transparent form beneath her torn blazer. The hand she placed on my right arm to cast healing magic was completely see-through, and there weren't any gaps between her fingers. Liquid would drip down from her every once in a while and stream down my body. She was only just maintaining her contour as a human, but it was clear she was at her limits.

As for Rose, she had lost an arm. Judging from her limp when she came running over, it also looked like her knee joints were damaged from when she slammed through those pillars. Her biggest wound, though, appeared to be the crack running down her torso. That one

came from the strike she took from the spider's leg right at the end. She had just barely avoided a direct hit, but there was a large fissure running from her waist all the way to her shoulder.

They literally had wounds all over. One wrong step would've cost them their lives. Yet they went through all that just to come and save me.

"Thank you. Both of you. Really, thank you..." I had no other words for my gallant servants...

If everything had ended there, it would've been the ideal happy ending. The fact that it wasn't over showed how harsh reality was.

"What are you celebrating about?"

A resentful voice hung over us as we rejoiced. I looked up and met raging red eyes. The white arachne was still perfectly healthy and glaring at us.

"Do you believe you defeated me with this small scratch?" she asked in a quiet, intimidating voice.

I couldn't see any damage to her face from the magic Lily threw at her. Even more surprising was that the burns she had were already completely gone. The recovery speed of a high monster was certainly on another level.

As for our combat forces, Lily and Rose were no longer in any shape to fight. It took anything and everything they had just to reach my side without dying. They didn't have a single fragment of strength left.

In other words, it was over for us now. Mysteriously, my heart was calm, and I simply accepted the hopeless reality before me. It wasn't all that bad if I could die with Lily and Rose by my side like this. I found salvation with them in my arms.

It was far better to die with them here than live in isolation, captured in this spider's web. So long as I was the white arachne's goal, she wasn't going to kill me, but I could just bite off my tongue.

As I made my determination, Lily's viscous hand grabbed mine. "Wait, Master."

"Lily?"

"It's too soon to give up," she whispered in my ear.

What did she mean? This situation was clearly a checkmate. It was impossible to turn the tables. And yet Lily's half-human face had a look of conviction to it as she stared at the approaching arachne.

"I shall tear your bodies to shreds and have you return what's mine."

The white arachne's legs clattered as she grew closer. She was planning to bring a definitive end to Lily and Rose's lives. The only reason she wasn't leaping full force like before was so I wouldn't get caught in her attack.

“Your desperate struggling was meaningless. I shall still be victorious.”

“Your actions are what’s meaningless here.”

Katou stood on the other side of the arachne and called her to a stop. Much like Lily, she still hadn’t given up. I looked toward her in shock and saw the slightest smile on her lips. It was somewhat reserved, but it was still a natural smile. It was as if she was truly glad I was alright. But that was only for an instant. Katou’s smile immediately vanished and she pointed a sharp gaze at the white arachne.

“Going on a rampage. Throwing a tantrum. Did you get what you wanted like that?”

“I’m just about to take it back. Shut up and watch, little girl.”

“Take it back? How amusing. Are you really capable of that?”

“What?” The white arachne was unable to let that rash remark pass and turned to face Katou. “Are you unable to perceive reality? No matter how you look at it, these pests do not possess the strength to continue fighting any longer. All that’s left is to trample them down.”

“That may be the case,” Katou acknowledged, shaking her head, “but that’s got nothing to do with this. If you kill them, you’ll never be able to obtain what you want ever again... Actually, you’ve never gotten what you truly want.”

“What nonsense. How can you claim such a thing?”

“Have you still not noticed?” Lily asked, switching in for Katou. “You’ve got it all wrong.”

“Wrong...? What are you prattling—”

The arachne turned back toward us and came to an unnatural stop. But Lily hadn’t done anything. The white spider stopped on her own. Her red eyes were wide like saucers, reflecting the image of my two servants huddled up against me.

Lily was sitting down with her hand on mine, nestled up against me, her flaxen hair draping down my shoulder. Rose was tightly gripping my other hand with her wooden grip. The white arachne continued to stare at them with a frozen expression.

“Looks like you get it.” The human portion of Lily’s face had a hint of pity to it as she spoke. “You have a will. You gained an ego. It’s true those are wonderful things. Yeah. I get it. I can remember it too. That instant my world filled with color.”

The white arachne had said it herself. Monsters didn’t possess what you would call an ego at birth. That’s why the moment they became my servants and obtained a will was such a vivid experience, incomparable to anything else.

“Our master gave us our egos. In that sense, he’s like our mother... No, something even more special than that. I can get why you’d want

to monopolize him, and what you felt when you abducted him.”

All three of my servants felt differently about me, but they all had something in common. Just as Lily alluded to by calling me a mother, they all felt a special yearning toward me. The arachne who snatched me away was no different. Rather, her radical actions were born of such emotions to begin with.

“But there’s no point in just taking our master, right? That’s what you’ve got wrong.” Lily tightly gripped my hand, having finished her healing treatment. “We think of our master as more precious than anything else. And our master treats us with the same feelings. This is an irreplaceable happiness that can’t be exchanged for anything else. That’s what I believe.”

Lily put her hand to her transparent, crumbling chest. But she looked perfectly content. Her silence spoke volumes; she took pride in the wounds she suffered.

Lily was happy. The same applied to Rose. And of course, to me as well. This was the situation these girls had staked their lives to create.

“Hey, you can feel our happiness too, right?”

My servants were connected to each other through me by our mental path. The white arachne was no exception. It couldn’t transmit complex information, but that didn’t make it meaningless. It was capable of passing information that couldn’t be conveyed through conversation, after all. We were directly conveying emotions that were difficult to scratch the surface of even using many, many words. In short, our emotions were all being fully conveyed to the white arachne.

Like the sense of accomplishment from doing one’s best for the sake of a loved one.

Like the joy of loving and being loved.

Like the ultimate form of true happiness which could never be obtained in solitude.

All of that formed a spear and pierced the white arachne.

That’s because she was also my servant. Originally, she was supposed to be a beloved companion. She was supposed to be with us like another member of our family. She was supposed to attain the true happiness I felt right now.

However, she could no longer grasp that happiness. That wouldn’t have been a problem for her before. She didn’t know of it back then. But now, she could directly feel the happiness, a happiness she’d never experienced in her long, long years of life.

She now knew of such happiness, but it had nothing to do with her. Seeing it so clearly before her, she was hit with the reality that she could never obtain it for herself. If that wasn’t enough to break her heart, then this white arachne truly was a horror.

“Uh, ah...”

But there was no way that would be the case. This girl who had just gained a heart was like a child. With no experience in heartbreak, she had no way of knowing how to deal with such despair. Above all else, the one who granted her that heart was none other than me, a perfectly ordinary boy with little such experience myself. As a result, this tremendous high monster carried an extremely commonplace weakness within her.

If only she didn't have a heart. Then she could continue being an invincible horror. In that sense, this conclusion was far too ironic for this girl who had been so elated at gaining an ego.

“I... I'm...”

No matter how sturdy her exterior was, that weakness within her was easily pierced.

And so, the white spider, whose tyranny knew no equal, was brought down ever so frailly.



“Thank goodness you're safe, Senpai.”

After being healed by Lily's magic, I more or less regained the ability to move and walked over to Katou. She greeted me with a reserved smile.

I started with what I was most curious about. “Did you think of that plan?”

I didn't have any firm reason for believing so, but it didn't feel like it was Lily or Rose's idea. Perhaps it was odd to put it this way since they saved me... but the method was far too dirty. I didn't think my honest, simple servants could think of such an idea. It must've come from a human. And just as I expected, Katou nodded.

“We couldn't figure out why the spider abducted you, Majima-senpai. It was a mystery. But we did figure out something else just from the fact that she did.”

“...That she was obsessed with me?”

“Yes. She wasn't looking at us at all. It was clear you were special to her. So, even though she did something so extreme, I realized she was nothing more than your servant. And if she was your servant, her thought process must've been similar to these two. As such, a strategy came to mind.”

“So you tried something that had nothing to do with her reason for abducting me.”

“Exactly. Regardless of what she was hoping for, if she saw there was something far greater but unattainable, it would crush her young heart. It wasn't all that complicated to create this situation. For a servant, being trusted by you, having trust in you, being devoted to

you... Receiving your love as their master is the greatest form of happiness, after all.”

“Is that how it works?”

“It is.” Katou nodded. Her expressionless features appeared somehow lonely. “Lily and Rose reaching your side alive—that was the condition for our victory, Majima-senpai. It was a pretty hard goal to achieve, but the two of them accomplished it splendidly.”

They risked their lives to challenge the arachne and reach my side without dying. That was the one and only way to win against an enemy who couldn’t be defeated.

“All that was left after that was telling the white arachne what the situation was. However, we needed to draw her into a conversation. That’s where I came in.”

“Why did you go so far when you can’t even fight...?”

“It’s the opposite. It’s because I can’t fight. She’s extremely strong, and I’m extremely weak. Someone like me brazenly stepping out is quite the curiosity, isn’t it? Besides, if I can be killed at any time, it doesn’t make any difference if it’s now or later. In that sense, my role held the most possibilities for my own future.”

“But it’s not like your life wasn’t in danger...” Rather, she could’ve been killed on a single whim, so she was actually crossing an extremely dangerous bridge.

“Plus, you came out in the middle of the fighting,” Lily said, cutting in.

Katou shrugged. “Going out to create an opening was... well, it was ad-lib. With how things were going, it looked useless.”

“You’re way too reckless. I thought my heart would stop.”

“You don’t even have a heart right now.”

I looked between them. “...Huh. You two have started getting along in my absence, I see.”

Katou smiled ever so slightly at my remark, but Lily frowned. Something really did happen between them. I was a little curious, but I could ask about the details later.

“Just hearing about that kind of plan sends a chill down my back...” I muttered.

“Is that so?” Katou asked as she cocked her head.

“Yeah. It’s fine that it worked and all, but it could have been a lot worse. The white arachne might’ve been a servant who operated on completely different principles, right?”

“Oh, that’s true,” Katou agreed, perhaps having considered such a possibility. “The plan was a gamble. Well, even if that was the case, we didn’t have any other options. But still, I didn’t think the odds were too bad to bet on.”

“Really? That’s hard to see... Why?”

“I mean, I know Lily and Rose.” Katou glanced over at Lily, who was literally stuck all over me. “For example, she can be quite distrustful.”

“U-Um, wait, Katou?!”

Katou casually ignored Lily’s protest. “And Rose is really serious.”

This little exchange gave me a glimpse of the power structure they’d built between them while I wasn’t there.

I wonder what actually happened. I had more and more reasons to ask Rose about the details later.

“So, what about their personalities?” I asked to move things along.

“This is just my opinion, but I think parts of your personality influence those of your servants, Senpai.”

I was caught completely off guard. “My personality?”

“Yes. From what I heard earlier, your servants didn’t possess hearts before meeting you. They gained egos, wills, and emotions upon becoming your servants. Meaning it wouldn’t be all that strange if your power did that, right?”

Katou’s theory reminded me of the true nature of my monster taming ability, the nature the white arachne had mentioned. By touching upon my heart, an ego sprouted within my servants. As such, the shape of their heart was largely influenced by my nature. It really wasn’t strange for it to manifest as a portion of my personality.

“So, if your servants are influenced by your heart, then the white arachne’s heart couldn’t be all that degenerate. I mean, she’s your servant, after all.”

I reflexively looked back at the arachne nest we had just left. She was sitting there in the center with all her legs folded in. Her eyes were cast to the ground. Her long white hair covered her face, so I couldn’t see her expression, but I could tell through our mental path that she no longer possessed the willpower to stand against us. She had unexpectedly lost everything she thought she’d gained and was now pitifully waiting for herself to rot away in isolation. She had been completely alone all this time. And she was likely going to be alone from now until the very end.

“...”

This space, without any walls, was supposed to be liberating, but for some reason, it felt cramped like a cave. I had seen this scene once before. Back then, I was the one in the middle of the cave.

“Master?” Lily noticed my strange behavior and called out to me.

“Lily,” I called back. That’s all I did. But that was all she needed to realize what I meant.

Her face, still half crumbled away, went slack, and her one eye shot open. “Master... Geez, seriously...” she said with a small sigh.

“Sorry.” I frowned and lowered my gaze. “She was the one who

hurt you two..."

"You don't need to apologize. I mean, I love that part of you, Master."

Lily smiled back at me helplessly, but she somehow looked satisfied. Her face was half-melted like a monster, yet her smile was more beautiful to me than that of a goddess.

"Much like how you said you loved me despite that I'm not perfect, I also love that sweet side of you. So, it's fine. Do whatever you like, Master." With that, Lily let me go.

After gaining her permission, I started walking toward the crestfallen spider.

"What's the matter, Senpai?"

"Master? What exactly are you...?"

Katou and Rose still didn't get what I was up to. Well, that was the normal reaction. It would have been strange if they'd anticipated such a stupid decision.

I drew closer and called out to the spider. "Hey."

Her human portion twitched ever so slightly. Her silky hair parted as she looked up at me with her red eyes. Judging from appearances, she was a bit older than me. At this moment, though, she looked like a small child.

"Want to come with us?"

The arachne's eyes shot wide open, and the ones behind me started panicking.

"Master?! What on earth are you saying?!"

"Y-Yeah! Senpai!"

Rose and Katou were bewildered. However, the one who was the most surprised was the arachne right before me.

"Are... you... serious... My Lord?"

"You're connected to me too with the mental path, so you can tell that much for yourself, right?"

"So... you're serious... I never thought... you'd say that..." She looked at me like she couldn't believe her eyes. "I attacked you, though."

"Well, that's true."

"And... I hurt you... a lot."

"That's also true." My own injuries aside, I was frankly furious that Lily and Rose suffered such major wounds. "But thinking back on it, you gained an ego by touching upon my heart, yeah?"

The egos of my servants sprouted by touching upon my heart through our mental path. The white arachne had said that this was the mechanism behind my taming ability. And when they did so, they accepted my wishes.

Lily saved me as my heart sank into despair.

Rose protected me when I made my determination to survive in this world.

This spider wouldn't be an exception to that. She also must've accepted one of my wishes. And thinking back on it now, I did have some ideas.

"I possess power. Power which won't lose to anyone. And with it, I shall achieve whatever my heart desires! Just as the ego I attained wills it!"

Recalling her endlessly arrogant speech, I gnashed my teeth with bitter memories. I'd experienced events which distorted my will many times over since coming to this world. On the day the Colony was destroyed, I was tormented by pain and all my values were smashed to pieces. I wandered through the dangerous forest for three days in complete isolation, on the verge of death. And recently, after meeting Kaga, I had a hand in a murder I never wanted to proactively pursue.

All of that could have been avoided if I possessed overwhelming power, power that could frivolously break the deadlocks of such extreme situations.

If only I had power.

I was only human. I'd be lying if I said such a thought never crossed my mind. However, such thoughts were extremely dangerous. They gave birth to arrogance. They gave birth to the thought that it didn't matter what I did so long as I had power. Just like they did with the arachne. I was sure the desire for power had remained buried within my heart. And on this evening, it took the form of this white spider's tyranny and bore its fangs. Such were the circumstances behind what happened.

"I'm the one who gave you a heart. So, I'm ultimately responsible for your rampage. My anger would be misdirected if I blamed you for it."

"My rampage was my own will. Such was my own desire and nature as a spider."

"Even if that's the case, it was backed by my desire. It doesn't annul my responsibility."

The white arachne was completely taken aback. "...You're quite the outrageous softie, My Lord. Do you understand? That's a terribly dangerous way of thinking. Even I am capable of easily imagining it. Trying to carry anything and everything on your back like that... will one day lead you to ruin."

"I won't allow such a thing to happen," Lily replied. "We support our master. That's what we're here for." Her gelatinous lower body slithered across the ground as she came up next to me. "Hey, how about you? Will you come support our master together with us?"

"That's... But... I surely do not possess the qualifications to do so." The arachne shook her head. "I ended up hurting all of you with my

selfish behavior.”

Looking at the way she hung her head, it was clear she wanted to come along with us. Her young heart was wrapped in feelings of guilt as if entwined by spider webs. Because of that, I believed I could stretch my hand out toward her.

She did in fact make a mistake. However, no irrecoverable harm had been done. Nobody died; I didn't lose anyone dear to me. On the contrary, if I abandoned her here, then this turmoil would only end as a simple tragedy.

I couldn't allow such a thing.

“You've only just obtained a heart. This was something like a child throwing a temper tantrum. And no matter how you put it, condemning a child's behavior as absolutely unforgivable and abandoning them is overdoing it. Forgiving you is only the obvious thing to do as your senior, right?”

The girl's pretty features slanted ever so slightly. “How long do you think I've lived, My Lord? I'm well over ten times your age, you know?”

“In which case, you at least know how to apologize, don't you?”

Clear tears poured out from the white arachne's eyes. “...I don't. There's no way I could. You cannot understand how empty my life has been.” She let out a long sigh. “But... It seems I need to learn of such things from now on.”

Thus, on this evening, I added a third servant to my group of companions.



Epilogue: The Master's Happiness

After the long break of dawn on the following day, I found myself waking up just around the height of noon. I suddenly let out a deep groan, feeling a dull pain throughout my body. The wounds I suffered the previous night were healed by magic, but it seemed my weak human body was heavily influenced by the shock of being injured.

I got to my feet with unsteady steps and petted Lily, who had returned to her form as a slime to serve as my bed. Then I carefully walked through the arachne nest; some of the flooring was missing due to the previous night's battle. I was headed toward a puppet carving some wood in her hand.

Rose bowed to me. "Good morning, Master."

She was making new parts for her body to replace her damaged ones. The cracks running down her chest and waist looked painful. She was also showing minor wear and tear all over, so practically everything had to be replaced. All the gear we'd managed to accumulate was also rendered useless, so she was likely going to be working on replenishing all that for a while.

Katou was asleep not far from where Rose was working. The sun was high in the sky, but she showed no signs of waking up. Yesterday was quite the ordeal, so she was surely exhausted. The reason she wasn't wrapped up in her usual sheets was because they had left a large portion of our luggage behind when they came to save me. We would have to go retrieve those later.

As I took a seat, such thoughts on my mind, someone hugged me from behind. I could tell who it was without having to turn around.

"Is it okay for you to be up? Shouldn't you rest more?" I asked.

Lily's wounds were deep enough they couldn't be completely healed with magic, so she had to undo her mimicry and loosen her consciousness to focus on recovery.

"It's not okay, but just a little..." Lily said in her usual spoiled voice as she moved into her designated spot at my side.

She hugged my arm and entwined her slender fingers with mine. It seemed she was just in the mood. That was perfectly reasonable. Yesterday was hard on her, so she wanted to be together and feel my touch. I felt the same, after all.

"..."

The crisis we faced yesterday really was harsh. It was basically a

miracle we managed to surmount it. However, as long as we found ourselves in this world, such difficulties were sure to continuously swoop down on us. I was filled with countless worries ranging from rampaging monsters to students with preposterous powers.

That was precisely why I wanted to feel the safety of those dear to me with my own skin, to share the same air as them. I enjoyed the feeling of Lily's warmth and softness for a while as I stared absentmindedly at Rose's work.

I suddenly felt a gaze on me and turned toward it. A pair of red eyes watched us from a short distance away. I unintentionally smiled.

"What are you doing all the way over there?" As I called out to her, the girl in white trembled and her legs chattered about. "How about coming over here? Let's talk. Oh yeah, I need to decide on your name."

I had to make a decision, but my small stock of flower names was already exhausted. So, what was I to do? I couldn't just call her Tulip or something. This was a bit of a problem...

The white arachne timidly walked partway toward us and waited for me.

Being able to be together with those dear to me while worrying about silly problems naturally brought a smile to my mouth.

Extra Story: That Which I Carry In My Heart ~Lily's POV~

I leaped toward a high branch and thrust out the spear in my hands.

“Yaaah!”

I let out a yell, and the tip of my spear gouged into the tree. My timing was perfect. My aim was good. The little skink lizard crawling along the tree split in two and fell to the ground. I landed a moment later and pumped my empty fist in victory.

Taking aim at small animals like this was about 50-50 for me. Quite often, they would literally cast off their tails and run away. I wasn't really good at hitting small targets.

Unfortunately, as a slime, I didn't have much knowledge in spearmanship to begin with. And the girl I became able to mimic a few days ago, Mizushima Miho, had no reliable skills in this regard either. About the only tool I could rely on her for was the oboe, which was useless in a fight. I doubted such an instrument could be procured in this world, anyway.

Fortunately, the original owner of this spear, the magical puppet I ate, had a fundamental knowledge of how to use it, even if it wasn't to the level of martial arts. Thanks to that, I was at least able to use it as a weapon in battle.

I picked up the dead lizard and stored it in my leather bag. I looked at my other bag filled with edible berries and loosened my cheeks.

I wonder if my master will be pleased with this?



“Welcome back, Lily.”

I was greeted by my master and Rose as I returned to the cave. Katou was still sleeping and didn't notice. I handed today's harvest over to Rose and then hugged my master's arm.

“Eheheh, I'm back.”

He had a perfectly average build, but unexpectedly his arms were quite firm. When he got teleported to this world, my master took part in the construction of the Colony as a member of the home team. He was a serious person, so it was easy to imagine he had worked harder

than anyone else. I could actually see him working vigorously in Mizushima Miho's memories too.

He'd evidently built up some muscle over the course of doing manual labor. There was worth in hugging his arm, and I wanted to have it pressed against my chest at all times. Actually, I pretty much spent all my time doing so except for when we were on the move.

"Sorry for making you do all this, Lily."

He gently brushed my head. His fingers were rough, like one would expect of a boy. His hand ran across my forehead. The feeling of his touch against the skin I was mimicking was endlessly endearing.

"It's fine, Master. It's more than enough for me to spend time like this when I get back."

I closed my eyes and thoroughly enjoyed the feeling on my fake skin. My master didn't refuse my embrace. Though, it had nothing to do with Mizushima Miho's beauty or the feeling of my breasts, which I had made a little bigger with my mimicry. He accepted my very existence.

Being by him was ever so calming. I strongly believed this to be my place. My master's side was truly special to my being.

I'm a mimic slime, a monster completely unique in this world. From the very moment I was born, I instinctively knew I was alone. That's why I immediately separated from my mother specimen's body and ran away as if shooting right out of her. In the next instant, the queen slime who'd birthed me came crashing down on the spot. If I had sat there inattentively, I would've been crushed flat the moment I was born. It obviously wasn't normal even for a monster without a will to kill their newborn child. Such creatures wouldn't be able to propagate.

In other words, my mother specimen didn't consider me to be the same as her. It was entirely possible she didn't even have a sense for actually birthing me into this world. She may have just thought that foreign matter had been ejected from her body.

After barely escaping the danger which immediately followed my birth, I lived on as a weakling in the forest. I simply wandered around without a purpose. I ran away when I encountered other monsters. If I couldn't get away, I used magic to intercept them and to create an opening to do so. I had no kin. Everything I met was either enemy or prey.

Wander around, meet something, run, wander around, meet something, eat, wander around, meet something, attack, run away, wander around, wander around, wander around... Those dull and uninteresting days went on and on.

That fateful day, the day I came to this cave, had been the same. I wandered through the forest as always and detected the taste of blood

on the ground. Sensing something wounded, I instinctively began chasing its whereabouts.

A small amount of blood was scattered here and there. It hadn't been that long since it fell to the ground. I continued pursuing the trail while diligently erasing those tracks. I wanted to make sure nobody snatched my spoils.

I arrived at the cave and finally found my prey. It had been fairly weakened. It was so debilitated it would absolutely die even if I didn't do anything. As a weakling of the forest myself, encountering this manner of prey was a great opportunity.

I immediately began eating my food. This was the first time in my life I got to eat something so big. I gradually dissolved it from the fingertips while it was still alive. Just then, my prey groaned. It was common for food to groan while on the verge of death. And yet I came to a complete stop. For some reason, I could understand that my prey was in grief over something.

Someone, save me.

It was odd. My prey was debilitated, so it wasn't even capable of groaning. In other words, anything that came from its mouth shouldn't have been coherent. There was no way for me to understand anything it said. Actually, I was nothing more than a slime in the first place. I wasn't able to understand anything like human language.

I now knew this was the voice of my master's heart conveyed to me through our mental path. Our souls were connected. Our hearts were connected. Everything about what was supposed to be my prey flowed into me through that passageway made of mana.

I swallowed all of it. I licked it all up and ate every last crumb. I was a slime; it was my instinct to digest everything that went into my stomach. And by tasting the heart of another, I became aware of my "self" with regard to "others." That was when he taught me everything about how "I" should live. That was how my personality quickly took shape.

Such a thing barely existed within me before, and I screamed in joy when it took such concrete form. I was changing. I was being changed. Anything and everything about me transformed. In that case, I wasn't the one eating him. Perhaps he was eating me from the inside out.

Why was this feeling so sweet? I wanted to eat more. No, it was the other way. I wanted to be eaten more. I was completely intoxicated.

When I noticed the thing flowing into me weakening rapidly, I came back to my senses. I wondered what was going on, and I realized my prey... that boy was dying. I spat out his hand in a panic.

I had no kin. Everything was either enemy or prey. And yet I

didn't hesitate to cast healing magic on him.

"*Save me.*" That's what he had said. That was the first time anyone desired anything from me. It was also the first time I thought to answer any such plea. Not that I ever had the opportunity to think of such a thing before.

The feeling of wanting to save this tattered boy was my very first desire since being born. And that desire persisted even now.



I embraced my master's arm against my chest. Just by being here, I could fully chew on the feeling of someone else being there. Just by doing so, I could confirm I wasn't alone.

I was originally an isolated existence. With no heart, I couldn't even think that such a thing was painful as I wandered around all alone. Upon fortuitously meeting my master, I was no longer lonely. I had my beloved master with me now. I had my cute and reliable little sister. And I had a heart which could think of these bonds as precious.

I couldn't help but pray such days went on forever.

"Master."

"What?"

I called out to him, and he replied. Just by looking up at him, a huge smile came to my face.

"I love you."

Higure Minto

A resident of Osaka. In elementary school, they dove into the sixth entry of a certain JRPG where a slime became an ally, and now they are writing a novel where the heroine is a slime. (September 2014)

Illustrations by Napo.

Born in February 1994 in Nagano. Their favorite food is ramen. Has recently taken on photography as a hobby. Taking pretty pictures is a great pleasure of theirs. (September 2014)



"I can tell when
you're hurt. I know
you hurt yourself
for 'this girl's' sake...
for 'my' sake."

"I want to heal
you, Master.
Okay? Hey,
Master..."



LILY
MIMIC SLIME

KATOU MANA
1ST YEAR HIGH SCHOOL STUDENT

MAJIMA TAKAHIRO
2ND YEAR HIGH SCHOOL STUDENT

"I'm
fine with
protecting
that girl.
For your
sake."

ROSE
MAGICAL PUPPET



"I want to
save you,
Master.
I want to
protect you."



ARACHNE

"I can understand
the obsession you
worthless specks
have for My Lord.
But unfortunately
for you, I won't
hand him over.
He is mine."











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Monster Tamer: Volume 1
by Minto Higure

Translated by Hikoki
Edited by Suzanne Seals

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Original Japanese edition published in 2014 by Futabasha Publishers Ltd.

This English edition is published by arrangement with Futabasha Publishers Ltd., Tokyo

English translation © 2020 J-Novel Club LLC

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